

剣使徒の神姫さまよう

デュエリスト



すえばしけん

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ファンタジア文庫

Samayou Shinki no Duelist

vol.1

by Suebashi Ken

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さまよう
神姫の
剣使徒

手の中の槍は、変化を終えていた。
無機的で簡素なものから、
一回り大きくどこか
生体を思わせる
曲線的な形へ――。

「ここからは
《聖盾》の護り
は通じないぜ。
実力で勝負しろよ」



Preface

——Who do you want killed?

Give me strength! The moment I finished speaking, the boy asked this of me.

He looked about twelve or thirteen, and though his looks were rather cute, the effect was ruined by the complete absence of expression on his face.

It goes without saying that his words just now had been delivered in a monotone voice. He was simply seeking confirmation – it didn't actually matter to him what my answer would be.

The boy appeared to view himself as nothing more than a tool.

He'd simply confirm the target and then move in to make the kill – he was a tool, and that was his purpose.

“Hmm...”

“Well, how should I answer?” I pondered.

I'd known even as I'd made my summons that whoever answered the call would have something of a twisted mindset – such was the cost of great power.

“Actually, before you talk about killing... I want you to smile first.”

The boy frowned. He looked perplexed.

“Watching a boy your age speaking that way with that expression on your face – I don't like it. Although it's true that you'll be fighting on my behalf, but I want to be sure you know at least this much before we can work together. Oh, but don't do it because it's a command from me, nor because it's your job. ——Anyway, long story short, it's about time you learned to laugh and cry.”

The boy stood silent for a moment before expressing to me that he'd never learned how to do such things.

“That’s okay. Just try and copy Onee-san, alright? Watch, it’s like this.”

I lifted the corners of my mouth.

“There’s plenty of time to talk about work later. The battles you’re about to experience are unlike anything you’ve yet seen. First, let’s teach you how to feel; fighting can come later. Right, what’s important now is that you learn what it means to be human.”

The boy was utterly flummoxed, and maintained his silence.

“You know, you’ve already died once and come back, right? ——That’s why – this time – rather than fighting to kill, why not fight to protect – to save? How’s that sound to you?”

He asked me what it was he would protect, who it was he would save.

“People. This world. ——You are going to become a true hero, in every meaning of the word; I’ll teach you. Along the way, you’ll learn how to enjoy life for what it is, how to laugh from the bottom of your heart – all these things will I teach you.”

——Why would you do that?

“Because you’re my DuelistSword Apostle, and I need you. Come. Together, we’ll protect this world.”

Prologue

The full-powered blow bounced off the hardened scales; it appeared not much damage, if any, had been done.

(Shit! You've gotta be kidding, geez...)

Bertolt felt a chill run down his back.

The scimitar he wielded had been found in this labyrinth, the Magna PortaGreat Gate, and it was a second-grade ReliquiaDivine Relic. A marvelous weapon, it boasted both a sharpness and durability that human blacksmiths were simply incapable of reproducing. Just such a marvelous weapon had just failed to inflict any damage.

The monster was lizard-like in appearance, though easily three, four times as tall as the average person, with three eyes in its head.

It was something that could only be found in these labyrinthine depths, and never on the surface – a Void Beast.

Three members of their five-man party had lost their lives when it had ambushed them from behind.

“T-This is bad! Let's get out of here already!”

“Shut your mouth! The prize is already within our reach – how could we possibly retreat at a time like this?!”

Bertolt, the party leader, screamed in fury at his cleric companion.

Under the guidance and care of Lady Luck, they had stumbled upon the treasure. A little more – just a little more! Once they had “that,” which lay behind the Void Beast, *then* they could leave.

If they left now, then treasure, fame, wealth – it'd all slip from their grasp.

The three-eyed lizard slowly lifted its head. Its black pupils lacked any hint of emotion as its gaze traced its way over, searching. Seeking.

Suddenly, that enormous frame charged over with a speed inconceivable for its large mass.

“Yaaaa——!”

Shouting mightily, the cleric strained himself to the utmost limits of his abilities.

A half-translucent shield appeared before the pair. The strength of this shield varied depending on the strength of its caster. With a shield of this strength, even the force of a charge from a horse or bull would be as naught.

The head of the lizard slammed into the invisible wall. Seemingly puzzled, it retreated a few steps.

But just as they heaved a sigh of relief, it again charged forward, butting the shield with its head. Over and over it repeated this action.

“H-hey...”

The cleric turned ashen.

On the fourth headbutt, the shield warped. With the fifth, it shattered entirely.

“O-oh no! Get out o—— aaaaaaaaaaargh!”

Cut off mid-sentence, the cleric was thrown to the ground, his neck caught in the lizard’s mouth.

Bertolt abandoned his companion to his fate and made a run for it.

It pained him to leave behind the supreme treasure, the top-grade Reliquia “Dragon Fang Gem,” but things being what they were, he had no other choice.

His decision was far too late, however. Perhaps because it viewed hunting its prey rather than devouring it as a priority, the three-eyed beast tossed aside the cleric's corpse and gave chase.

With its mouth – jam-packed with razor-sharp, saw-like teeth – it bit down hard on Bertolt's right arm and tore it free.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH....!”

That notwithstanding, Bertolt forced himself to keep it together and continued to run for dear life.

If they had just retreated earlier, then all would be well. If only they'd simply left after the first party member had fallen—

Never stopping to look behind himself, Bertolt nevertheless felt the lizard close behind him.

“Shit....SHIT! Against a monster like that, only a Duelist could win!”

Bertolt continued to run, screaming profanities all the while. Perhaps because he'd long since surpassed his mental limits, he didn't feel any pain from his shoulder, though the absence of his limb threw his balance awry. Before long, he tripped and fell.

As he struck the ground, a mind-numbing fear threatened to overwhelm him; he wanted to vomit.

(No! Nono, nonoNoNONONO! I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to dieIDON'TWANTTODIE——)

Obsessed with collecting Reliquia, and after having bribed top officials to eliminate his competition, he'd finally attained the position of leader in a party of the “Sky's Oath Legion.”

That's right, there was no way he could die here. How could *he* possibly die *here*? This had to be some kind of mistake.

——Despite his attempts to escape reality, however, reality refused to bend.

The scritch-scratch of the lizard's footsteps drew steadily nearer.

Even were it that top-ranked adventurer, the elite serving the “ShinkiDivine Princess^[1] who Supports the Sky” directly – even he would crack under the stress of this situation.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God——”

Falling to the ground, Bertolt pleaded for salvation in a tone utterly contrary to his attitude a moment before.

“Guardian of our city, O Goddess, hear my prayer – grant me shelter. Deliver me——”

It wasn't as if he were a particularly religious individual; indeed, this was the first heartfelt prayer of his entire life.

Alas, no miracle descended, and death still hung over him, imminent.

From out of the darkness, the lizard appeared, its jaws gaping wide – and suddenly froze.

“Wha...?”

He blinked.

The lizard had not stopped of its own accord. Even now it struggled, twisting its body with all its strength, but in vain. A terrible force held it captive – a cord of light, coiled around its body.

This was an Orison^[2], but like none he had ever seen – not once had he met a cleric with the ability to so casually seal such a terrifyingly powerful Void Beast as this.

Without him noticing, the tiny shadow of a human form had appeared beside the three-eyed monster.

The person was dressed in a formless robe. The shadows cast by the soft glow of the surrounding flora, combined with the hood of the robe, hid the

person's face from view. Whoever it was was quite short, either an elderly individual or a young child. This labyrinth was home to several types of humanoid Void Beasts, but this individual felt like none of them.

Be that as it may, it was simply impossible that a lone human could have survived to come this far.

Moreover, not at any point had he sensed the approach of this stranger. No matter how much he'd lost himself to fear, this was simply inconceivable. There wasn't a thing alive that could move without giving off any hint of its presence, whether sound or otherwise.

That fearsome silhouette lightly waved its hand toward the twisting, fighting beast. Suddenly its form began to distort and warp, as if vacuumed into some unseen hole, and then it was gone.

Silently, Bertolt watched the scene unfold, never moving.

The Void Beast, which had slain four well-known adventurers in their prime, which had effortlessly plowed straight through a divine shield, was unexpectedly not the apex predator of this place.

The shadow drew near. From beneath the shadows of the stranger's hood, only the person's mouth could be seen – a mouth which was even now curling into a smile.

That was the final straw: the last, frail fragment of Bertolt's self-control finally shattered.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa——”

A blood-curdling shriek ripped free of his throat as he madly dashed off into the distance.

Translator notes and references

[1]This term pops up everywhere in this series, e.g. the title. It's composed of two kanji “神姫,” which mean “god” and “princess” respectively.

(Goddess, the “translation” used by the author for the title, is “女神.”) It’s too much of a hassle to say “Divine Princess” every time, so I’ll just use “Shinki” in its place from now on.

[2]The term used is “神術,” which literally translates to ‘divine arts.’ Given the fantasy-RPG nature of this series, though, I opted for a more “appropriate” term. An orison is simply a prayer, but in the sense of invoking the divine.

Chapter 1: The Fallen Girl



“——Alright, alright. I get it already; I know what you want. Let’s just talk it over a bit first, okay?”

The youth held up both his hands as he spoke.

He looked fifteen or so. Definitely not twenty.

Black hair and black eyes. Average height. A slender frame without a hint of frailty.

“As you can see, I’m clearly unarmed. I’m not here to disrupt anyone’s living, nor to poach anyone’s prey. I just wanted to see if I could find some stuff to sell. Let’s be honest here – money is pretty much the second-most important thing for daily living. I’ve recently been through some hard times, and unless I want to starve, extraordinary times call for some extraordinary measures.”

The other party ignored his long speech, and instead closed the gap between them in an instant.

He wanted nothing more than to retreat just as far, but found his back already pressed up against the wall.

“On that note, the very most important thing is, of course, life itself.”

Raising his head, he laughed disarmingly.

“And so – would it possible for you to just let me go?”

Again, the other party revealed nothing of its feelings.

It was, after all, an insectoid Void Beast in the shape of a large praying mantis. It was roughly twice his height: around three and a half meters tall. Its forelegs were like enormous sickles, and hideous mandibles sprouted forth from its triangular head.

“...How cold of you. Not one for hospitality, are you?”

Suddenly, he ducked as the Void Beast's sickle-like forelegs slashed through the very spot his head had been a moment before.

That was a close one, he muttered to himself as he escaped forward.

The Void Beast blocked off his escape by situating its enormous body in his path. However, as a mantis, its body was raised well off the ground, propped up by its many legs – this roadblock still left some gaps. It didn't look like running to the left or right were options, but if he could break through the middle...

He watched its bladed forelimbs close in on him, one from each side – would he make it in time?

“Oooohhhhhhhhhhh!”

Yelling, he pushed off the ground with all his strength.

Yuuki Takamigahara was a ninth-rank adventurer. A support specialist.

——To be honest, though, that description was a bit inappropriate. If you asked the person in question, he'd be the first to tell you that he had no aspirations about being an adventurer.

If you then asked him what he saw his occupation to be, he'd reply thus.

“Wealthy merchant. To be.”

“Man, it's been a long time since I've failed like that.”

Yuuki sighed as he dejectedly plodded his way home.

He wore no armor. He was instead dressed in normal clothing you might find anywhere. From the looks of things, all he had to his name were the clothes on his back. A quick glance at his waist and back would reveal no weapon.

This was because his goal was not to hunt Void Beasts.

No, he ran a small shop along the main street of town where he sold assorted odds and ends. His inventory ranged from precious herbal medicines that could be harvested within the labyrinth to ores and other such things, and – of course – Reliquia.

The way Yuuki saw things, exploring the labyrinth was simply procurement of goods.

Accordingly, he shunned engaging Void Beasts in battle – retreat was his first policy. He took the utmost care to avoid setting foot anywhere a Void Beast called home. The moment he'd sense a Void Beast's presence up ahead, he'd change direction. On the rare, unlucky occasion he'd find himself face-to-face with these monsters, he'd make a break for it as soon as he could. It was for this reason that he forewent armor, opting instead to travel as lightly as humanly possible.

The mantis beast he'd run into earlier had been unexpectedly hidden around a corner's bend.

There was no getting around it – he'd been careless. If he'd done his utmost to keep his senses about him, he'd have heard it coming.

“I guess when your spirits are low, your ability to concentrate is as well...”

Entering the labyrinth earlier in the day, his hopes had been high. God only knew he needed it – recently, his luck had been abysmally poor. Forget Reliquia, he had failed even to find any hint of either the medicinal herbs or ores that he usually sold.

Given the rapidly fading condition of his light stone, he estimated he'd been in the labyrinth for roughly six hours; it would soon be midday.

If he didn't head back now, it'd wreck his other plans for the day. He had other work scheduled for the afternoon. The wages weren't bad, so there was no way he could afford to put it off.

“That said, I can't just return home empty-handed. I at least need *something*...”

Muttering to himself as he scanned the area, he caught sight of something ahead of him.

Lifting his light stone for a better angle, he continued forward.

“Cloth...?”

Perhaps the victim of a Void Beast, it was now nothing but ragged, tattered junk.

Or maybe not... a Reliquia which held Wisdivine energy, even if it was really just high-quality fabric, was still valuable.

Gently lifting the piece of fabric, Yuuki saw luxurious, golden hair laying beneath.

“...Not cloth then. A robe?”

It was the kind of loose-fitting robe that a cleric or priest might wear. The part he held now looked to be the hood.

Where there were clothes, there was, of course, a person wearing them.

“——It looks like she lost consciousness and collapsed here...”

He took her small body in his arms.

She groaned softly. She still lived.

She looked to be in her early teens. In the weak light of his light stone, and through the dirt smearing her face, he caught sight of delicate, beautiful features. The impression he felt from her was almost sacred.

Checking quickly, he was reassured to see that her condition was nearly the opposite of her ragged clothing – there was no evidence of grievous injury that he could see.

Looking ahead, he noted the single path of footprints. She’d likely stumbled along, before finally collapsing here as her strength gave out. That seemed

to make sense.

“That said... What on Earth is a girl doing here all by herself?” Yuuki asked himself, head skewed in thought.

What should he do in this situation? Then again, it’s not like he had all that many options. Things being what they were, it wasn’t like he could simply continue on his journey of procurement.

Well, there’s no helping it, he sighed, lifting the girl onto his back.

The sound of her breathing echoing in his ear was both shallow and rapid, but it didn’t seem like she was in any immediate danger. The reason for her fainting was likely simply exhaustion and hunger. Thankfully, she was very petite, and he felt no added burden from carrying her on his back.

The journey back to the surface was otherwise uneventful. Emerging, the light of the midday sun stung his eyes.

Glancing at his surroundings, the occasional church knight standing guard or adventurer party could be seen.

Near the entrance to the labyrinth was a medical clinic for adventurers. As he considered depositing her into their care—

“Mm... Ah...”

The girl on his back stirred.

“...Where...Where am I?”

“In town. We’ve returned to the entrance of the labyrinth. You collapsed within... Do you remember that?”

“Town...?”

The girl suddenly forced herself up.

“A city! Oh, this is Solitus – my city! How joyous! Blessings be upon this city and its people! Come, my children, pay your respects to your patron Shinki!”

Her words were followed with an uproarious “Ahahahaha!”

At her sudden, unexpected, and strange behavior, Yuuki was left speechless, his mouth gaping open wordlessly.

——Eventually, he took notice of the crowd which had slowly gathered, their attention focused in his direction.

Solitus.

This city had been founded in honor of the world’s patron deities: the Heavenly King and his five subordinate goddesses – the “Shinki who Supports the Sky,” the “Shinki who Raises the Sun,” the “Shinki Crowned with the Moon,” the “Shinki who Scatters the Stars,” and the “Shinki who Guards the Earth.”

Reaching into the depths far below Solitus was a vast labyrinthine space, known more commonly as the Magna PortaGreat Gate.

Seeking those mysterious tools imbued with unimaginable powers – the Reliquia – an innumerable horde of adventurers with the utmost confidence in their own abilities raided the labyrinth day and night, testing themselves in the refiner’s fire.

Some dreamt of instant wealth.

Some sought to express their pious devotion to their patron Shinki.

Some sought only to fill their hollow stomachs.

——*Adventurers.*

As Yuuki continued along with the girl on his back, she alternated between making insane declarations and laughing heartily.

“Why the rush, my child? Tina wishes to gaze upon this fair city.”

Ignoring the mad ramblings of his baggage, Yuuki continued on until arriving finally at his home, the “Shophe Boris.” Entering, he slammed the door shut and drew the bolt.

“So this is to be the temple wherein I shall dwell?”

The girl looked around excitedly, utterly ignoring Yuuki, whom was leaning against the wall, breathing heavily.

“Fat chance. This is my home.”

“Yours? ——No matter. You need not fear that I shall make any undue requests for extravagance. For where Tina is, even such is made a palace of the divine – yea, even a temple.”^[1]

She nodded lightly.

“...So, Tina’s your name then?”

“Yes, though to be most precise, it is ‘Albertina’. The sound ‘Tina’ fills me with the utmost delight, however. You have my permission to call me by this name. Speaking of which, first disciple of this Shinki, what is your name?”

“Yuuki. Takamigahara.”

“Yuuki. Ta, Tamiga... Tatamira... Takarami, Tara...?”

Crooking her neck in frustration, she at last bestowed him with a benevolent smile.

“It is a good name.”

“So you bit your tongue a bunch, only to just give up like that? ——
Whatever, it’s fine. Anyway, you’ve been going on over and over with
‘Shinki this’ and ‘Shinki that’ – are you sure you didn’t hit your head and
lose your memory or something back in the labyrinth?”

“How could that possibly have happened? Why would you ask such a
thing?”

“Well, let’s leave that for another time. For now, you need to understand
that the Shinki you speak of are an absolute existence to those of faith.”

“Guardians of the city, guides of the people. Yes, I know.”

“Hence the problem. Declaring yourself a Shinki in the middle of the city –
people will think you’re insane!”

That wasn’t all – if she’d been seen by the deeply pious, she’d likely have
become the victim of a little mob justice. Worse, if she’d been discovered
by the Church of the Five Holies, then she’d have been labeled a sinner, and
in the worst case, beheaded. It didn’t matter which eventuality actually
occurred – none were pretty.

“I don’t know the particulars of your situation, but at the very least, you
need to stop that kind of talk already.”

“In this city, a Shinki is not allowed to declare her status?”

“No.”

“Huh...”

For a time, she frowned in silence, seemingly unable to accept his words.
Soon, however, the smile returned to her face. She seemed to have given up
worrying about the matter.

“Alright, then. No point worrying about it now. Tina would like to rest now.
Yuuki, I’d like to request a place to sleep!”

Entrances to the Magna PortaGreat Gate could be found scattered all around outside the city borders.

It didn't need to be said that normal citizens were not granted entry. The entrances were all surrounded by thick, stone walls. These led to a metal gate which was guarded by knights of the Church of the Five Holies.

"Hmm? I thought you'd already left for the day? Did you forget something? —Actually, are you feeling alright? You look pretty exhausted," a guard Yuuki was familiar with asked him, as he arrived once more at the entrance to the labyrinth.

He really was worn out. Mentally, anyway.

"No, I've got some other work I need to get to."

Yuuki answered just the first of the questions.

Behind him stood around a dozen youth. The youngest was barely a child of 10, while the oldest was 21.

"Given up the adventurer life to be a nanny, have you?"

"Like hell. This is a temp job the training school assigned me. Anyway, it's like I've told you before: I'm not an adventurer, I'm a merchant. The only kind of magic I work involves numbers and money."

"Well, you certainly seem lively enough. Looks like you'll be fine this year?"

An innocent smile bloomed on the stern face of the young knight.

"I'll be fine... Meaning what exactly?"

"Your name was on the church tax bureau's list. Your taxes for the past year are in arrears, so do be careful."

"..."

“Sensei, what does ‘in arrears’ mean?” asked the youngest child of the group.

“...It’s just one small way that the poor stick it to the man, Mark.”

“Make sure that your ‘sticking it to the man’ stays at a level where your store goods don’t get confiscated. ——Changing the topic a bit, what’s with the kids?”

“They’re here to observe, Commander.”

A cold voice cut in, coming from the female knight serving as second-in-command.

“The Adventurer Training School’s Eastern Branch has already sent over the seventeen required licenses. Please hurry them on through; they’re blocking traffic.”

“Oh my, you’re right. Well then, please head on through. Do your best to learn, alright? ——Oh, also, Yuuki...”

“What’s up?”

“The Oath Legions have apparently been involved in a major incident. I know you don’t really have anything to do with them, but these last few days, they’ve been even more neurotic than normal. Do me a favor and be careful, alright?”

In this city, the occupation of adventurer was held in high regard.

The Church of the Five Holies, which was devoted to the worship of the Shinki, was the dominant power in the city, and not only operated schools of academic instruction, but the adventurer training school as well. There was no age limit imposed, but generally speaking trainees were between the ages of ten and twenty.

Although it wasn’t strictly necessary to enroll to become a licensed adventurer, but it proved advantageous, both in terms of knowledge and

practical experience. Pretty much all the adventurers of note these days were graduates of the training school.

Yuuki was here as an assistant, helping the instructor with assorted tasks such as managing the roll. With a large organization like the church as his employer, his wages were quite fair. Because his store had been struggling, this job provided his primary source of income.

Today's job was a trip to the labyrinth. The idea was to give the kids a chance to visit the workplace of an adventurer.

Yuuki's job, however, ended now that he'd brought the students to this point. The instructor from the Church was running a little late, though, and so Yuuki was his stand-in until he arrived.

Yuuki wasn't entirely fond of the part of his job which required him to babysit a bunch of kids, but understanding that it was what he was being paid to do, he didn't have anything to complain about.

For now, he needed to put the stranger sleeping in his house out of his mind, and focus on his work.

"Okay, listen up!"

After taking the children through the metal gate, he clapped his hands to draw their attention and spoke.

"This is the entrance to the labyrinth, Magna PortaGreat Gate. We're going to wait here for a bit. The instructor from the Church will arrive shortly. At that point, training will begin, so you do not have the freedom to run around. ——Now then, please wait here."

Though this was not the peak time for raiding, adventurer parties were nonetheless gathered nearby.

The area within the walls was a plaza roughly fifty meters in diameter. In the center lay a small building which looked like a chapel. Within was a

series of steps leading underground, recessed about five meters into the ground.

The origin of the labyrinth, its entrance, and the timing of their construction were open questions.

The one thing that was understood was that plumbing the depths of this labyrinth was a worthwhile endeavor.

Suddenly——

“The hell you doing?!”

A rage-filled voice roared.

A cowering boy had been surrounded by a large man and what appeared to be his adventurer companions. It seemed he’d accidentally run into them, in his excitement.

“Uh, um, I’m sorr——”

“What was that?! I couldn’t hear you!”

The armor of the large man bore the emblem of the “Star’s Oath Legion.” Yuuki frowned.

The “Oath Legions” were groups of adventurers who served directly under the Shinki. The cream of the crop, joining a Legion was the goal of many of an adventurer. However, as the requirements focused on overwhelming strength and ability, it wasn’t necessarily the case that a Legion member was also a person of character.

“You’re a trainee, right? Are you serious? Don’t tell me you think ‘sorry’ is going to cut it when you run into a Void Beast in here. Do you think they’d simply let you go with that?”

Yuuki sighed and walked over.

“Hey, sorry about that. Looks like the kids I’m watching have given you a bit of trouble.”

As he spoke, he tried to smile the friendliest smile he could.

“Haa?”

The pupils of the man’s eyes flitted over to glare at Yuuki.

“Could you let him go with that? He’s already reflecting on his actions. Isn’t that right, Edgar?”

“Y-yes. Um, I’m really sorry about just now.”

The boy, lively with a heart full of mischief just a moment prior, now looked about ready to burst into tears.

“...Fine. I forgive you.”

“I really appreciate that. Right then, let’s go——”

“Hold it. I said I forgave the kid; I never said anything about his teacher. You’re his supervisor, so you’re responsible for his actions, right?”

It looks like things have taken a turn for the troublesome, Yuuki thought to himself.

“Well, that much is certainly true. So? What would you like me to do?”

“Spar with me for a bit.”

The man smiled, baring his yellow teeth.

“I haven’t had a chance to fight any Void Beasts lately, so my body feels a bit out of sorts. If we spar a bit without any weapons, it should be just fine. Isn’t that right, Teach?”

In other words, he was picking a fight. The man’s goal was to beat him to a pulp before his students. What bad taste.

“...Huh. Well, I guess it can’t be helped, can it? Alright.”

Yuuki sighed and slowly rolled his sleeves up.

“You know you’re going to regret this, right Jumbo?”

“We’ll see how long that confidence lasts.”

The man spat. From the looks of things, Yuuki’s refusal to be intimidated had soured his fun.

“Show him what’s what”, “Kick his ass” — the man’s party members called out mockingly.

The bustling crowd of spectators grew. The adventurers were excited to spectate an event which they didn’t have to bear any responsibility for. Yuuki’s students, however, were filled with unease.

“Oh, right. There’s something I should say before we begin.”

Once the man had made eye contact, Yuuki continued.

“The first hit determines the victor. —You get that, you brats? Watch carefully. Sensei’s going to show you how a real adventurer fights.”

“What did you say—?!”

His personality seemed the kind that could be easily baited. His face flushing in anger, he charged forward and swung his fist with all his might.

“Oraaaaaaaaaa!”

“Guhaaaaaaaaaa!”

Yuuki took the full brunt of the blow directly to the face, and was thrown into the air. He spun a full rotation and a half before finally falling face-down to the floor.

“——What the hell? He sounded like he was pretty confident in himself, but he’s this weak?” the man mocked.

“...”

“Talk about blowing hot air, seriously. Can you really be an instructor like that?”

“...”

“Having a beansprout like you for a teacher, what’s their future——”

The man’s confident voice suddenly cut off mid-sentence.

This entire time, Yuuki had yet to lift himself from off the ground. Moreover, his body suddenly began to convulse disturbingly.

“Hey, hey, don’t tell me something’s wrong?”

“Maybe you hit him somewhere bad...?”

“...Shit, what’s happening now?”

The man and his party members worriedly discussed his condition among themselves.

Disregarding what went on within the labyrinth itself, the murder of someone out here was something that even a member of an Oath Legion would have to bear responsibility for. The laws forbade fights for personal reasons, something the Church knights from public security would not overlook.

“——I-I’ll let you off with that. Watch yourself next time!”

The man and his companions left those words as they hurried away.

The children encircled their fallen assistant instructor from a distance, not a one daring to make a move. Finally, one girl summoned up the nerve to approach.

“Uh, Yuuki-sensei?”

“Puha!”

Yuuki suddenly lifted his head, gasping forcefully. Flipping agilely into a handstand, he gently touched down on the ground once more. “Uoooh,” his students exclaimed in surprise.

“Sure-kill technique ‘Play Dead’—— The key to the technique is in the rotation of the body as well as the trembling of the hands and feet. If your opponent was just looking to pick a fight, they’ll definitely be frightened off.”

“You say ‘sure-kill’ but no one died...”

“Exactly right, Kaya.”

Yuuki nodded deeply.

“The target of this ‘sure-kill’ technique is the enemy’s desire to fight.”

Hearing his words, the girl didn’t know if this was a joke she was supposed to laugh at or advice that she could sincerely respect. Instead, her confusion made itself evident as a most complicated expression took hold of her face.

“Feel free to add this technique to your repertoire, but you guys need to remember that it only works if your opponent’s human. Don’t bother trying it on a Void Beast – you won’t survive the experience. ——Anyway, as I said beforehand, the first hit determined the victor. The other guy ran with his tail between his legs, wholeheartedly regretting his actions. In other words, it’s my victory. Hahahaha.”

Sticking his chest out proudly, Yuuki gave a jolly laugh. The crowd quickly scattered, bored by the result.

“...Um, so what we just saw – was that the ‘way a real adventurer fights’?” one boy asked, dissatisfaction evident on his face.

“Yep, that’s right, Beginning-class Trainee Edgar.”

“But——”

“Alright, listen up. This is a good opportunity for me to teach you guys something. ——Let me ask you all something: what do you think is the foremost goal an adventurer should have?”

“Ooh, ooh, that’s to bring home a looooot of Reliquia as offerings to the Shinki!”

Kaya, who stood in the front, acted as the group’s representative in answering his question.

“A perfect textbook answer. Too bad it’s wrong.”

“...Why?”

“Let me frame that question a little differently. Do you guys think the Duelists are pretty cool?”

Everyone nodded pretty much simultaneously. Moreover, a sparkle could be seen in the eyes of the boys.

“The strongest has gotta be the ‘Snow Blade King’.”

“He’s gone already. No, the strongest is the ‘Thousand-Eyed Witch’.”

“Oh, don’t forget the ‘Iron Claw Tiger’ and the ‘Black Demon’——”

“Right, right, I get it. Let’s just leave it at that for now,” Yuuki interrupted.

“I know you guys very much aspire to be Duelists. They’re strong enough to easily crush a horde of Void Beasts, to single handedly clear out the entire labyrinth. Plays and novels even star them in central roles. ——But let’s put them out of our minds for just a moment. The level they’ve attained isn’t something normal humans can emulate – trying to copy them is a shortcut to a bad end. No, the original purpose adventurers served was not that of the Duelists, who wander the land accumulating valorous merits left and right, and leaving behind a legacy that stands the test of time.”

He paused for a moment before continuing.

“What is the first and most important duty an adventurer carries? —The answer is ‘to live.’ Even if you fail to bring home a Reliquia on a given trip, someone who survives to see another day might well bring home two the next. It doesn’t matter if you’ve been humiliated, or if you have to abandon what Reliquia you’ve collected – none of that matters. One thing, and one thing only, is of importance – you must not die.”

The majority of the kids were stunned.

At school they’d been taught to “gamble their very souls in order to bring back Reliquia for the Shinki.”

Though they saw the truth in his words, not one had previously so much as spared a thought along those lines.

“Now then, in order to continue living, what is the one thing that is absolutely essential? Beliefs? The blessings of the Shinki? Like hell. The second you enter the labyrinth, there’s only one thing you can rely on – yourself. Does that mean that what’s most important is strength, then? Well, that kind of thinking isn’t wrong. But great strength used at the wrong time, the wrong place, or for the wrong reasons is meaningless. That’s why this is my answer – ‘weigh the pros and cons’.”

This time, the trainees simply blinked vacantly.

“In other words, it’s important to understand before you act what the consequences will be: what will be lost, what will be gained. For example, imagine there’s an enormous Void Beast standing guard over a particular Reliquia. Do you fight it? Do you give up? Figure out some stratagem to lead it away? Ask for help? Every situation will be different, and it’s possible that at varying times, every one of those answers might be correct. If you’re clear on the extent of your abilities, and the time comes when you need to prioritize your own life, you’ll better be able to judge what you need to do. —As you just saw, I carefully weighed my options just now, and here I am – still alive. If I’d won, would his friends have simply left me alone? This, too, was another way in which I won the larger victory.”

Yuuki watched as the expressions on the faces of some of the trainees changed. *Eh? His words don't seem to carry any persuasive power anymore. Forget him.*

“The more precarious the situation, the more careful consideration is necessary before you act. It's only when you're left with no other option, no other recourse, that you should place your trust in the Shinki – in your faith. Truth be told, most of the time you're better off not worrying about the Shinki at all. Whether you agree or not, there's no harm in simply remembering what I've shared with you just now. ——Oh, just one thing: don't tell anyone I've said this to you – I'll get yelled at.”

Because the training school was run by the church, the instructors were taken from among the ranks of the faithful. If they found out what he'd said, they'd obviously be less than pleased.

“Oh, don't worry about that; we won't tell anyone. It's just that...”

Looking guilty, Kaya pointed timidly at Yuuki's back as she spoke.

Hmm? Yuuki turned his head to glance behind him.

Standing immediately behind him was the middle-aged, assistant head priest – today's instructor – glaring murderously at him.

“Uh, don't get me wrong!”

Yuuki leapt to his feet and straightened out his posture.

“When discussing things to pay attention to in the labyrinth, I may have gotten a little overexcited and emphasized certain aspects overmuch. I definitely wasn't suggesting blasphemy against the Shinki! Not in the least!”

Returning to the training school, Yuuki was called in by the school head and subjected to an interrogation.

“I've received reports that you've attempted to indoctrinate the youth with blasphemous teachings. Is this true?”

This city was centered on its faith in the Shinki. Practically everyone living within its walls was a believer. When it came to the labyrinth, the Church taught that it was “a test given by God, an exalted mission given to the faithful servants of Deity.”

That their city was protected by the Shinki was an undeniable reality. Yuuki wasn't one to look upon others' beliefs with contempt, but he nonetheless felt strongly that these teachings pressured people to produce results. The way he saw things was simply more utilitarian and practical than anyone else. The world inside the labyrinth was anything but a fairy tale wonderland.

“This city only exists through the grace of the five Shinki. Accordingly, unity and harmony are the guiding principles espoused by the Church of the Five Holies; indeed, our very reason for being.”

The headmaster, who concurrently held the post of chief priest for the district, sighed.

“To be honest, you don't seem to be that well regarded by either your seniors or your peers, Yuuki Tamakigahara.”

“Yes, I think so as well,” Yuuki replied candidly.

His relationship with church personnel was rather poor as his lack of faith was obvious at a glance.

“On the other hand, to be truthful, personally I don't mind all that much. Faith is something that comes from deep within, and is a matter best left for each individual to decide for themselves. A formal inquiry into that won't change a thing. ——Changing the topic a bit, your qualifications as an adventurer have you as a rank nine, correct? How would you like to take the qualification exam to raise that rank? I think it'd serve well to improve your reputation a bit.”

“...Actually, contrary to what you might expect, I'd love to take the test, but I'm afraid I just lack the ability.”

Yuuki scratched his head awkwardly as he replied.

“Then, at the very least, you could put a bit more effort into your studies as a trainee. It’d change the way others look at you. Your attendance is rather poor; weren’t you in the advanced class?”

“Ah, I’ve been a little busy recently for various reasons... You see, I think my true calling is as a merchant.”

“I know; you succeeded Boris’ shop. To be honest, though, your business skills are quite meager compared to his.”

As the gentle voice jabbed him where he was weakest, Yuuki finally fell silent.

“Well, you can’t change what can’t be changed. You’ve faithfully discharged your duties toward the Church. When it comes to knowledge about either Reliquia or Void Beasts, you’re definitely not lacking, and your evaluations from the beginning-class trainees are quite good. That notwithstanding, you could stand to take a bit more care with regards to interpersonal relationships; that’d alleviate my worries a little. ——You’re dismissed.”

Yuuki threw a “Thanks for your time” behind him as he left.

There were three training schools in this city, the eastern branch of which had an enrollment of some two hundred students.

There were three ranks of classes, beginning, intermediate, and advanced, and transitioning between them generally took two or three years.

The classes were roughly divided by age. Generally speaking, students entered at age ten, with students graduating from the beginning class at about twelve, from the intermediate class at about fifteen, and from the advanced class at eighteen. There were, of course, exceptions – students who had entered late, skipped grades, or had been held back.

The school building was shared between the three classes. It was small, but organized; the nature of their work focused on the training of one's body, and so the time spent in class was rather limited.

“Aah, Yuuki-san...”

As he exited the headmaster's office, he was greeted by someone he knew well.

The one greeting him was a studious-looking girl who wore a shy smile.

“Finished with classes for the day already, Franka?”

“Ah, not yet; I have one left. I had a little time before it starts, so I was taking a light stroll when I saw you coming out of the headmaster's office. Um...”

Franka paused for a moment before continuing.

“Hey Yuuki-san, are you hungry by any chance? If you don't mind, why not join me for a bite to eat?”

“Hmm? Oh...”

As he hesitated, pondering how to respond, his stomach went ahead and loudly proclaimed its own thoughts on the matter.

Under the shade of the large tree behind the school's lecture hall sat two people.

From within her book bag, Franka extracted a small cloth parcel. Unwrapping it, she pulled a couple pieces of bread within which were sandwiched slices of cheese, tomato, and cured meat.

“Here, please help yourself.”

“Thanks.”

Yuuki took a bite; it was crisp. The aroma of the toasted bread seemingly wafted directly from his nostrils into his stomach. The sweet and sour taste of the tomato and the saltiness of the cured meat and cheese made a joyous harmony as they slowly melted on his tongue.

“...Delicious.”

Although something this simple hardly classified as cooking, it nonetheless was more than satisfactory at appeasing his hunger as well as appealing to his palate. Franka definitely had skill when it came to selecting ingredients.

“That’s great. ——You know, to be honest, I saw you earlier today. When you came by earlier to pick up the beginner-class students, you looked like you were in a real hurry; I figured you hadn’t had time to eat.”

“Well, you guessed right. Today... hasn’t exactly been my day.”

Yuuki sighed. Seriously, what a brutal day it had been: he’d been beaten, scolded by the headmaster, and earlier in the labyrinth, not only had he failed to find anything, but he’d instead brought home something strange.

All of a sudden, Franka leaned in.

“——Eh? Yuuki-san, you have a broken lip? It’s injured here.”

“Injured?”

As he spoke, he suddenly realized – he’d been struck by a member of the Star’s Oath Legion.

“Ah right, I got involved in a little incident earlier. It’s nothing to be concerned about.”

“Don’t say that. Once it swells, you’ll change your mind. You won’t be able to eat like that—— Here, just a moment.”

Franka reached into her bag and pulled out a small, fingertip-sized stone.

This was the Reliquia known as a Divine Pearl. It was the literal crystallization of Wisdivine energy – the origin of all miracles. They formed the core of both the restorative and offensive skills employed by clerics.

Franka closed her eyes and placed her hands on Yuuki's lip. As a result of their close proximity, Yuuki felt a soft, round sensation on his arm.

“——And done. It should be just fine now.”

The Divine Pearl turned to dust as she spoke.

“...Sorry about that. I know those things aren't free.”

“Don't worry about it. Yuuki-san's always looked after me, after all.”

The young cleric girl laughed happily.

“I'll just buy another from your store.”

Franka was both an advanced-class trainee adventurer as well as a frequent customer of his small shop.

She was only sixteen, but because she usually wore a sober expression, was rather tall for her age, and had an ample figure – or rather, an ample chest – she looked quite mature.

A few years ago, she'd gotten caught up in something from which Yuuki had rescued her, and the two had been fast friends ever since. Thinking back on the girl he'd first met, the girl standing before him now sure had grown. In more ways than one.

“So, how did your promotion exam go?”

“Oh, the results came out already – I passed. I'm now a fourth-rank.”

“That's amazing. Grats!”

Franka delightedly expressed her thanks with a smile.

Most adventurers fell into one of three categories:

- Those who wielded weapons – swords, axes, lances, bows, etc., i.e. physical attackers.
- Those who controlled divine energy for offense, defense, and healing – the clerics.
- Those responsible for appraising Reliquia, possessed intel regarding both Void Beasts and the labyrinth, and provided all non-combat contributions – the support specialists.

Now, of course adventurers weren't restricted to these roles, but adventurer qualification exams all focused on a single one of these areas at a time.

Franka was now certified as a fourth-ranked cleric.

For a person of her young age, this was an amazing accomplishment. Furthermore, she'd already attained a wealth of experience within the labyrinth itself, having successfully retrieved Reliquia on more than one occasion. Given her accomplishments, she ought to be able to join the ranks of a professional adventurer group, should she so choose.

She had only begun her journey as an adventurer three years ago. Her entrance exam had declared her potential as a cleric, and she'd enrolled directly in the intermediate class. She'd immediately stood out as a star student, and just a year later she matriculated from the intermediate class to join Yuuki in the advanced course.

"Yuuki-san, how's, um... that going? Your promotion exam..."

"Ugh. Don't ask."

"Oh, s-sorry..."

Franka recoiled a little as she apologized.

Yuuki was a ninth-rank support specialist. You might say he was the failure of failures of the advanced class. For reference, ranks nine and ten were well attainable for a hard-working beginning-class student.

“I’m joking, I’m joking. I wouldn’t get mad over something like that. I can’t seem to raise my rank and the store’s failing—— I guess I just lack talent.”

“N-not at all!”

For some reason unclear to him, Franka responded over-seriously.

“Because Yuuki-san, when it comes to Reliquia, you know so much! That’s why, if you were to take things seriously...”

“Well, I run a store, so that kind of thing’s no problem at all. No, I’m fine when it comes to appraising Reliquia; the problem is that I have no interest whatsoever in taking part in battle. The only reason I’m even a ninth-rank is because the rank nine and rank ten exams are written. If I wanted to raise my rank above that—— Well, it’d be problematic.”

The early levels of the labyrinth were mostly free of Void Beasts, constantly patrolled by Church knights, and even had maps for sale. It was only about as dangerous as climbing a mountain.

However, the deeper one went into the labyrinth, the more frequent one encountered Void Beasts, and the more powerful they were. As such, the formation of a party was an absolute necessity – and by extension, combat ability.

That’s why high-ranked adventurers, even support-oriented ones, had to train their bodies and hone their combat skills. In the advanced class, hand-to-hand combat training was a required course.

“I’m different from those who focus solely on raiding – I’m a merchant first and foremost. That’s why I’m fine with keeping to the early levels of the labyrinth: grabbing herbs and what Reliquia I can find while avoiding Void Beasts is enough for me.”

“Is that so...”

“Let me guess – someone was badmouthing me?”

“...”

The look on her face was more than an answer to his question.

“Well——”

She started to speak, but stopped partway through.

A group of seven or eight people, all of whom were fifteen and older and had well-developed physiques, wandered past the pair. The youth who looked to be the center of the group wore a cold expression.

These were the elites of the Adventurer Training School Eastern Branch’s advanced class.

Among their number was a particularly talented individual who had broken the record for youngest person to attain a rank-one adventurer status. Yuuki didn’t attend all that often, so he wasn’t entirely sure, but he assumed it was the central figure of the group. What was his name again?

One of the group spat as he passed by, mumbling the word ‘garbage’ under his breath as he did so.

Yuuki gave a wry smile, but held his silence.

It wasn’t just the instructors and church personnel that he had poor relations with; this, of course, extended to his peers in the advanced class as well. It seemed they disapproved of both his poor performance as well as his lack of faith in the Shinki. Behind his back, he was frequently known as ‘that godless piece of trash’, ‘greedy pig’, ‘blasphemer’, etc.; on occasion, their words would find their way back to his ears. It wasn’t like he’d met those people before either – gossip traveled fast.

“Yuuki-san...”

“It can’t be helped. When they look at me, they see a slacker who misses out on class, only thinks about money, and, worst of all, someone who’s just a ninth-rank support specialist. From the viewpoint of those who seek with

all their heart and energy to join the ranks of the Oath Legions, I'm nothing but a heretic."

The Church of the Five Holies was responsible for coordinating all interactions between the people of the city and the temples wherein the Shinki dwelt – The Sanctuaries of the Five Shinki. The person known as the Patriarch stood at the peak of this massive organization which, in addition to its religious duties, was also responsible for city governance and law enforcement.

Within the city of Solitus, but one organization held influence on par with the Church – the Oath Legions.

The goal of the Legions was to find and present Reliquia as offerings to the Shinki, of whom they were direct subordinate organizations. Each individual Legion belonged to, and was directed by, a single one of the Shinki temples, and thus there were five Legions in total, representing the five Shinki.

Members of the Oath Legions were held in high esteem by others, and their wages and living expenses were very generous.

As one might expect, then, the requirements for joining their ranks were extraordinarily demanding. The right to even apply for a position among their number required at least a third-rank adventurer qualification, and so their numbers were small. The gate to becoming a Legion member was truly narrow indeed. It could be said that this was the aspiration of every adventurer.

After graduation from the training school, the most common path for an adventurer to take was to accumulate combat experience while simultaneously taking the Legions' entrance exam. Of those who had yet to graduate, roughly only three people a year managed to pass the exam.

Such was the genius of the youth before him, who had attained a position in the "Sky's Oath Legion" while still an intermediate-class student——

“I remember now. That’s Stefan Klose – the youngest child of the Kloze family.”

“——?”

“The guy leading that group just now. He’s pretty amazing, right?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, he is.”

The girl nodded.

The Kloze house was a prestigious one, and many among their family had grown up to serve in the Legions, some of whom had even eventually become Commanders of the Legions themselves.

“If you’re seen together with me, you’ll be looked down upon as well, you know?”

“I’m fine with that. But Yuuki-san, are you really okay with this?”

Franka frowned slightly as she looked at Yuuki.

“When it comes to raiding, or even just training... Haven’t you ever considered letting them see you truly go all-out?”

“Let’s wait until the store’s bringing in tenfold what it does now, when I can afford to hire store attendants – then I’ll reconsider.”

Skilfully evading her question, Yuuki swallowed the final bite of his meal and took a gulp from the canteen Franka handed him.

“——Thanks for the meal; it was exquisite.”

Resigned, Franka sighed.

“It’s nothing. ——If this can repay just a little of what you’ve done for me, then it was worth it. If it wasn’t for Yuuki-san, then even bread would be a luxury I can’t afford.”

“You don’t owe me a thing.”

Franka’s parents had passed away. The one who’d set her on the path of an adventurer she now walked had been Yuuki, though all that she had accomplished since were but the fruits of her own hard work.

“It was just a bit of marketing. The more adventurers there are, the more customers my shop will receive. Plus, you’re a frequent customer yourself, Franka.”

“That doesn’t diminish my gratitude. ——You know, ever since I first started here, it’s been my dream to some day go adventuring with Yuuki-san. Nothing could make me happier than to see that dream come true.”

“Sorry for disappointing you.”

Yuuki gave a bitter laugh and shrugged.

Every adventurer had their own way of doing things, though very few were loners like Yuuki. The majority were adventurers-for-hire who could be employed to enter the labyrinth as needed. Franka, too, as a member of a school-formed party, would occasionally take jobs as well.

Certain types of herbs and ores, and Void Beast meat and horns could only be obtained within the labyrinth, let alone Reliquia – all of which could be traded for money. Though the Church warned against the mindset which led to the hoarding of money, but from a practical standpoint, adventuring in the labyrinth was quite profitable indeed.

“It’s about time that I get going. Oh and Franka, feel free to drop by the store——”

Suddenly he remembered the unresolved situation facing him back home.

“Er, strike that. Forgot I closed up early today.”

“Is that so? I’ll come by tomorrow then. I’m going raiding tomorrow with Master, so I’ll drop by on my way back. ——Cya tomorrow then!”

Standing up, she gave a hearty wave and left.

Yuuki's store was located in the outskirts of Solitus, in the corner of town known as "Labyrinth Way." The small building with the sign which read 'Shoppe Boris' was it.

His inventory included the essential tools a labyrinth adventurer might need, as well as Reliquia and whatever else one might find within the labyrinth. The latter he both bought as well as sold; the sign hanging at the entrance read, "Whatever you find in the labyrinth, we'll buy!"

The fate of Reliquia brought back from the labyrinth was twofold: they either became part of the discovering adventurer's collection or were sold – to stores, the church, or the Legions.

Reliquia which were sold were either given as offerings to the Shinki, or placed in store inventories, awaiting the right customer. Correspondingly, Reliquia formed an important part of Solitus' economy, and circulated frequently between buyers and sellers.

Yuuki faced a tough situation as a small business owner who lacked the necessary capital.

The larger stores filled every nook and cranny of the city, and, to ensure a constant supply of Reliquia, often had enterprising adventurers on retainer. Both from the perspective of inventory as well as value, a small store like Yuuki's stood no chance.

That notwithstanding, Yuuki still had two 'weapons' when it came to business.

The first was his extensive knowledge of Reliquia; the other, the fact that he himself was an adventurer as well. If the store owner's inventory had been found personally within the labyrinth, then the cost of obtaining those goods was zero.

It was for that very purpose that Yuuki had made his trip to the labyrinth earlier this morning——

And taken home something he'd never before picked up.

Returning home from the training school, Yuuki passed through his shop, and opened the door to private residential space.

——The bed was empty.

“... Where'd she go?”

She'd wanted to rest, and so he'd lent her his bedroom and gone to work
—— Just where had she gone?

He'd checked the bedroom before leaving – she'd definitely been fast asleep.

His thoughts were abruptly interrupted by a small sound. His ears pricked up at the sound; it had come from the kitchen – no, from the food pantry.

Yuuki stealthily snuck his way in through the room's doorway, catching sight of a small figure. With one hand, she lifted an apple near her mouth, suddenly removed it to arm's length, before finally – as if falling victim to the siren call of temptation – giving it a ferocious bite.

Crunch! The sound of her biting into the apple echoed through the small room, and her sculpted features bloomed into a radiant, childlike smile. The apple's juicy sweetness had seeped into her mouth.

“So uh, what exactly are you doing?” Yuuki called out, causing the girl to yelp in surprise before turning to look at him.

“Uh... Y-You're back I see?”

“Just now. That apple——”

Frantically, Tina tried to hide the apple in her hands behind her back.

“Everything in the pantry's mine, you know?”

They were all things Franka had given him a few days before. To Yuuki, who was currently weathering some tough times, these were precious, life-saving provisions.

“Well, um... It’s not what it looks like.”

The girl kept her hands behind her back as she shook her head vigorously.

“Tina didn’t steal any food! It’s just that, you know, after I woke up I was feeling a bit famished, so I thought I’d go look for something to eat...”

“And then...?”

“And then I saw this place, and then the apple, and it... it really looked like it wanted Tina to eat it, so...”

“...”

“Um, er... Maybe you could consider it an offering?”

Her voice grew softer and softer as she spoke, likely because she felt guilty.

Well, considering she’d passed out in the labyrinth, a little hunger was unavoidable.

Yuuki tapped her lightly on the head, sighing as he thought to himself that he could treat her to a single apple. As he did so, Tina handed the apple to him, the evidence of her crime still marring its surface.

“...I’m sorry,” she said dejectedly.

“I know that this is your home, and everything here is yours. It’s just that, well, Tina found it too hard to fight off her hunger...”

The scene before him reminded him of a small puppy being scolded for acting up.

Interrupting them, her stomach suddenly growled noisily. Unable to help himself, Yuuki broke out laughing.

“It’s fine; don’t worry about it.”

“...You’re not mad?”

“You clearly feel bad about it already. The dining room’s over there. I’ll make a little something for you, so why don’t you take your apple and wait there, alright?”

He was the one who’d picked her up, so he was at least partially responsible for her welfare. A child’s meal portion shouldn’t be a problem.

“Mm, delicious.”

Placing her bowl on the table, Tina exhaled deeply in palpable satisfaction.

What he’d prepared for her had been a simple bowl of porridge with salted meat. Yuuki wasn’t particularly gifted at cooking either; no, this was more a case of “hunger is the best spice.”

“The grain you used is really something rare. Tina knows nothing about it.”

“I used rice.”

“Raiss?”

“You’ve never heard of it? Well, actually, it’s not all that common here either. It’s still a relatively new import.”

The main staple here was wheat, followed by potatoes. Although the farming villages outside of Solitus cultivated a wide host of crops, rice was still pretty rare.

Between the apple and the porridge, the hunger of the self-proclaimed Shinki seemed to have abated.

“Allow me to offer you my thanks once more Yuuki Katamiga... Takagami...”

“Takamigahara, but you can just call me Yuuki. My last name can be a bit of a tongue twister, I know.”

“Yuuki it is, then. You rescued Tina from the labyrinth, and gave me food to eat; I thank you from the bottom of my heart. To be thanked in person by a Shinki is a rare honor for one of the faithful – you should be most proud!”

As she spoke, she proudly raised her head and stuck out her chest.

“With you, it’s heartfelt sincerity one moment and unabashed conceit the next. Anyway, you got one thing wrong – I’m no believer.”

“You’re not?”

“No, I’m not. On that note, I’ve been wanting to ask – who exactly are you?”

“I’ve been telling you this entire time, haven’t I? I’m a Shinki. ——Don’t worry, I’m not mad. Standing among the people and sharing wisdom is one of the duties of the Shinki, after all. There’s no way we’d get mad simply because someone’s rather unenlightened. Pretty great, aren’t I? I grant you permission to express your admiration.”

Tina nodded energetically.

“...Assuming for a moment you *are* a Shinki – which one of the five are you?”

The “Shinki who Supports the Sky,” the “Shinki who Raises the Sun,” the “Shinki Crowned with the Moon,” the “Shinki who Scatters the Stars,” and the “Shinki who Guards the Earth” – these were names known to all.

Tina’s answer, however, came as a complete shock.

“I have no idea.”

Yuuki frowned.

“You... don’t know? Why not?”

“I don’t know what I don’t know. I know the five appellations, but Tina honestly has no clue which of the five she is.”

“If you don’t even know that much, then how can you speak with such confidence... Er, more importantly, why *is* it you think you’re one of the Shinki?”

“It’s not ‘think’ – it’s the truth, so I’m sure of it.”

No progress whatsoever. Yuuki sighed, and tried a different tack.

“In that case, O Great Guardian of this city, Albertina-sama, why were you passed out in the labyrinth?”

“Just call me Tina. There’s no need to stand on formality.”

His sarcasm passing straight over her head, the young girl continued to speak.

“I was there because that’s where I was born.”

“Born...?”

“Perhaps ‘came to be’ is a better way to phrase it. In the large room of the labyrinth, Tina first became aware of her existence. From that moment forward, I simply *was*.”

“So you *didn’t* lose your memories in the labyrinth?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“And, let me guess – the reason you can say that with absolute certainty is because ‘it’s the truth, so you’re sure of it’?”

“Exactly.”

Yuuki groaned in frustration as he scratched his head.

“Well, how long ago were you born then?”

“After I awoke within the labyrinth, I was caught up in something and I ended up wandering around the labyrinth... until I ran out of energy and collapsed. That was roughly, hmm, a day or two. That feels right, yeah.”

“Your footprints were quite clear, and judging from the dust around you, I’d guess you were unconscious for a day, at most...”

If she were to be believed, then, she’d only been born a maximum of three days ago.

“Even if you say that, no matter how I look at you, I can’t see someone who was born three days ago. You can talk, you know what an apple is... To be honest, your story is quite suspect.”

“I’m not lying. From the very beginning, Tina’s mind was filled with knowledge,” Tina pouted unhappily.

“So, right as you came into being, you already knew things?”

Yuuki pondered for a moment before continuing.

“I’m going to ask you a few questions. I want you to answer reflexively – don’t think about the answer. If you don’t know the answer, then just say you don’t know. ——What’s the name of this city?”

“Solitus?”

“What’s the nickname for the labyrinth?”

“Magna PortaGreat Gate.”

“The pentagram is a symbol for what organization?”

“Pentagram?”

Yuuki illustrated with his finger on the tabletop.

“Ah – the Church of the Five Holies.”

“The new belfry of the Church’s Cathedral – when was it constructed?”

“No idea. I imagine it sounds pretty nice?”

“To get to the main plaza from this shop, what street do you need to take?”

“That I don’t know either. I’ve never visited the city before.”

For reference, the new belfry tower was constructed a month ago. To celebrate its construction, a large festival had been held. Also, one had simply to take the road directly outside the storefront to reach the plaza. These two things were common knowledge for anyone familiar with the city.

Yuuki had used these questions to gauge which domains her knowledge extended to.

She knew about apples, but wasn’t aware of rice, which had only recently been introduced. She knew of the Shinki and of the Church, but was ignorant of both the newly constructed belfry and local geography. Her command of the language was just fine; her phrasing was a little strange to be sure, but it was in keeping with her personality.

(In other words—— She possessed general knowledge, but lacked knowledge regarding the city layout and recent events.)

To summarize, her answers fell in line with what she’d been saying the entire time – that she had been born but three days prior. She’d started off with some generic knowledge, but had never visited the city, and it was only to be expected that her knowledge was deficient when it came to things that were easily changed.

These answers had been given spontaneously and without hesitation.

It didn’t look as if she’d prepared her answers beforehand as if reciting from a script, nor did such an action fit what he’d seen of her personality. While it was technically possible that she was a master liar who had Yuuki dancing in the palm of her hand, it was far more likely that she was simply

a nutcase who sincerely believed the stories she had fabricated within her own mind.

“Is that all?”

“Ah, yeah.”

“No problem at all. Answering the questions of the faithful is an important task for the Shinki. Don’t worry about it. —On that note, what did you hope to understand by asking me those questions?”

Tina leaned forward eagerly.

“Whether or not you’re truly a Shinki. I think I’ll keep my answer to myself for now, though.”

“I’ve done nothing but speak the truth. To be suspected by my first disciple sure is discomfiting.”

“How can someone who’s doubting you possibly be your disciple? —In any case, your collapse in the labyrinth was very unnatural. I just wanted to see if I could deduce the reason for it.”

Yuuki smoothly changed the topic.

“Actually, if you’re a Shinki, where’s your Duelist?”

“Hmm...”

Tina couldn’t answer, and her gaze wandered.

The DuelistsSword Apostles waited upon the Shinki. Standing guard over their wards, they possessed an absolute, superhuman strength. Each of the five Shinki had their own Duelist – this was common knowledge held by even the youngest child.

“If you can show me your Duelist, then even I’d have to admit that you are indeed a Shinki. Why don’t you summon him?”

“The Shinki must call forth their Duelists to safeguard their lives. This I know. To be sure, I could do so before.”

“Before...?”

“At the time I came into this world, I had the divine energy to do so. Unfortunately, however, due to some... unforeseen difficulties, that power is now gone.”

WisDivine power was the power by which the Shinki brought forth miracles. Through the medium of Divine Spheres, human Clerics were able to work similar phenomena, if far more limited in scale – the so-called Orisons.

“What happened?”

“...Is it that important that you know what happened?” Tina replied, her face divulging her reluctance to speak on the matter.

“Regardless of the reason, the fact of the matter is that Tina currently has not a whit of Wis left. As such, I am unable to call forth my Duelist.”

“I get it, I get it. So left without your Duelist, you were forced to make for the city, but got lost and passed out along the way.”

“Just so, just so.”

“In any case, with you unable to create any miracles, you have no way of proving that you’re one of the Shinki. It seems simpler to assume that you’ve lost your marbles.”

As Yuuki finished speaking, the self-proclaimed Shinki puffed her cheeks angrily.

“As soon as Tina recovers her divine energy, she’ll be able to both summon forth her Duelist as well as plenty of miracles! And I haven’t lost anything! What the Shinki must do, the identity of the enemy we must defeat – I remember it all!”

“...”

Hrm.

Everything else aside, she sure was spirited. Yuuki kept an eye on her as he mulled things over. Out of nowhere, he heard a small cough – Tina was intentionally clearing her throat in an attempt to bring back a more serious atmosphere.

“Now then, it’s my turn to ask a question. Yuuki, you are an adventurer who labors on behalf of the Shinki, correct?”

“Not in the least.”

“...”

His answer took her by surprise, cutting off her intended follow-up, and she fell silent, before suddenly asking——

“W-W-Why not?! Did you not rescue Tina from the labyrinth? Moreover, is the purpose of an adventurer not to collect Reliquia to offer to the Shinki?”

“My primary calling in life is as a merchant. Anything that can be found in the labyrinth I’ll buy, and anything that someone needs I’ll sell. At the same time, I sell all the consumables necessary for raiding the labyrinth. Although it’s true that I work as an adventurer as well, but that’s solely for the sake of stocking my store inventory. I picked you up by chance.”

“Well then, Merchant Yuuki, I have words I would bestow upon you. I hereby recognize thee as the first disciple of the Shinki Albertina, and grant thee the right to enter into my service.”

“Huh?”

“My goal now is to restore divine energy with which to call forth my Duelist. For this, I will need Reliquia, and by extension, trustworthy souls to aid me in my task. Additionally, with this domicile serving as an interim temple, I will need someone to guide me and offer me counsel. Tina came into this world only three days ago; I lack the necessary experience.”

This was hardly a position to be envied. Regardless of how grandiose she had made it sound, it seemed she more or less just wanted a gofer.

Altogether belying her solemn demeanor, Tina's eyes sparkled as she looked at Yuuki expectantly.

"There's so much I want to say, I don't even know where to start. First off, stop calling my house your temple."

"... I can't?"

"No!"

She looked crushed. She knew that if he kicked her out now, she'd be left completely homeless.

"Don't misunderstand – I'm okay with letting you stay here. Kicking you out would be a horrible thing to do."

"Really?!"

Her expression brightened in a flash.

Yuuki himself had been saved countless times by the generosity of others. It didn't matter if she was a Shinki or just a person – she was in need, and so he'd help her. That he wasn't likely to ever see remuneration for his efforts was of no consequence.

"A thousand blessings upon your kind soul! As expected from my first disciple!"

"I'm no one's disciple. You need to understand one thing, though – the only thing I'll give you freely without expectation of compensation is a place to stay. When it comes to collecting Reliquia or summoning your Duelist, you're on your own."

"Ah, I see..."

“To avoid future inconveniences, let me clarify that there are two reasons why I refuse to help.”

Yuuki sat in the chair opposite the young girl and began to explain.

“First, whether or not you really are who you claim to be, having a self-proclaimed Shinki by my side is dangerous. There’s a very high probability that your claims will be construed as blasphemy. In this city, the Church is one enemy no one can afford to have, least of all me. This will allow me to keep up the pretense that I was unaware of what you were doing – that I was simply giving you a place to stay temporarily.”

“... So you’re saying that it’s not necessarily because you don’t believe me?”

“Exactly. Now, secondly: I’m a businessman through and through. The very act of business is founded upon the principle of trade. If you want my help, that’s fine; what you want is your business. The question is, can you pay the price? I imagine you don’t have any money, do you?”

“None...”

Tina bowed her head, crestfallen, though before long she raised it once more.

“I-If Tina regains her powers, she can reward you tenfold——”

“I have no interest in such an unreliable promise.”

Those who said they’d “pay you back when they got the chance” never actually meant it.

“The one thing I can place my trust in is cold, hard cash; doing things on credit’s out of the question. If you don’t have any money, then you’ll have to figure things out on your own. Your life is your own, take responsibility for yourself. Nothing in life is free – that’s the rule of this world. ——And that’s pretty much what I wanted to say.”

Yuuki knew that his words were ruthless, but he'd needed to say them anyway. Clarifying the terms from the start was an important rule to live by.

He'd originally expected Tina to lose heart, but instead, she frowned and, after a moment, spoke once more.

"In other words, if I can pay you... you'd be okay with helping me?"

"...You can look at it that way. Why? It's not like you have any money."

"Mm, it's certainly true that Tina doesn't have any money—— But she does have a plan."

"Oh? By all means, please share."

"Tina has something to offer you in trade – her body!"

"..."

Yuuki was so shocked he fell out of his chair.

"So? What do you say?"

"What the hell do you mean 'what do you say'? O Great Shinki-sama, are you serious? Are you seriously serious? Do you have any idea what it means to 'sell your body'?"

"Er, what it means?"

Tina stared blankly.

"Well, doesn't it just mean to lend a hand when needed – to help out in whatever way possible? Whatever you need, it's all okay. Moreover, if you give me Reliquia, I can even work miracles for you! Miracles! Just for you! To be able to purchase the services of a Shinki for mere coin – this is an amazing discount!"

"Hah... a brat like you; of course you didn't know... Still, I have to say, this is my first time running into a goddess who'd discount herself like

that.”

“Didn’t you say you’d buy anything ‘that can be found in the labyrinth’? I fall under that category. You can’t dispute that logic, so stop thinking so much, and just take the offer!”

“...For the love of—— how do I put this? Well, in short, I don’t deal in human lives here. Human trafficking’s banned by the city, you know?”

“No problem!”

Tina acknowledged his argument with a nod before continuing.

“Sure, ‘human’ trafficking might be illegal, but Tina’s a Shinki, not a human. That makes it god trafficking!”

“I don’t buy gods either!”

“So you were lying earlier when you said you’d buy ‘anything’ as long as it was from the labyrinth?”

Tina pouted irritably.

“Tina was found in the labyrinth, so you ought to be willing to buy her. Or are you a liar? What kind of upright businessman is a liar?”

“The issue here isn’t ‘lying,’ but common sense... Actually, wait – if you’re something that I picked up in the labyrinth, then that means you belong to me already. In that case, it’s not your right to trade me something that’s already mine, right?”

“But didn’t you just say ‘your life is your own’?”

Yuuki was struck speechless. He’d been thinking of her as nothing more than a silly child, but she was unexpectedly articulate. The fact that he knew she neither bore ill intent nor was the least bit calculating only made it all the more difficult for him to counter her words.

Thinking for a bit, he asked, "...Hypothetically – just hypothetically – if I was unwilling to make the deal, I'm assuming you'll just go to other shop owners and make them the same offer? You'd 'sell them your body'?"

"Well, I wouldn't have any other choice," she replied without a moment's hesitation. "Tina needs help, and money is necessary to get that help. But Tina has none."

——Yuuki contemplated for a moment what would occur in such a situation.

This city had its fair share of black market dealers. Moreover... it also had more than its fair share of people with money who were quite fond of lively young girls.

In short, this would become a simple problem of supply and demand.

"..."

"Hmm? Is something wrong?" Tina inquired, surprised by Yuuki's prolonged silence.

At long last, he finally spoke.

"I have no other choice, damn it. Fine, it's a deal. I'll help you as far as my ability allows."

"Oh, so that means——"

"BUT!"

Yuuki forcefully interrupted the joyous Tina, continuing, "There's a condition – you're not to tell anyone you are a Shinki, nor are you to speak a word regarding your purpose or knowledge of the Shinki."

"...I understand."

"One other thing: this contract only lasts until you are able to call forth your Duelist once more. In the event that that never occurs, then our agreement

will end when we are both agreed. At the time of our parting, I expect to receive proper payment for my services. Even if you can't pay me in cash, Reliquia will do. I'm not expecting anything like a Dragon Fang Gem here, but the higher the quality, the better."

"Understood. Tina promises to do her best to repay you in high-quality goods. —Just to check though, does this mean you've finally acknowledged that Tina is a Shinki?"

"I do not. Nor do I reject it, however. To be accurate, I don't really care either way."

"What do you——"

Tina's expression was hard to read.

"I don't care if you're real or if you're a fake – I'll help you either way. I'll work toward the goal of aiding 'the Shinki known as Tina in recovering her powers.'"

The girl frowned slightly as she thought hard.

"...Although you still won't acknowledge me, I'll take that compromise. Alright then, from this day forth, Tina's body is yours, and you will lend her your aid in turn."

The deal was done. Yuuki nodded weakly.

Ahhh, just as he'd predicted – she'd already brought troubles upon him. Still, he was a businessman and a deal was a deal.

"Just for reference, just how much divine energy does it take to summon a Duelist?"

"Let's see..."

Tina closed her eyes as if sensing some unseen presence.

“Your storehouse is over there, right? If we were to add all the Reliquia you have in there together, we’d still be a long way off.”

“Oh? You can tell that kind of thing?”

“I need to be able to sense divine energy; I wouldn’t be able to work any miracles otherwise. Something like that is child’s play for Tina. ——That said, if you want to show your admiration, by all means, feel free. Come, come – praise me.”

“Let’s try a little experiment then.”

Yuuki proposed another trial, completely foregoing the opportunity to offer her any praise, leaving Tina rather disappointed.

“...An experiment? What do you mean?”

“To see whether or not you can really work any miracles.”

But how to do so? ——Just as Yuuki muttered to himself, Tina raised her voice and spoke over him.

“Before that, I have something to ask.”

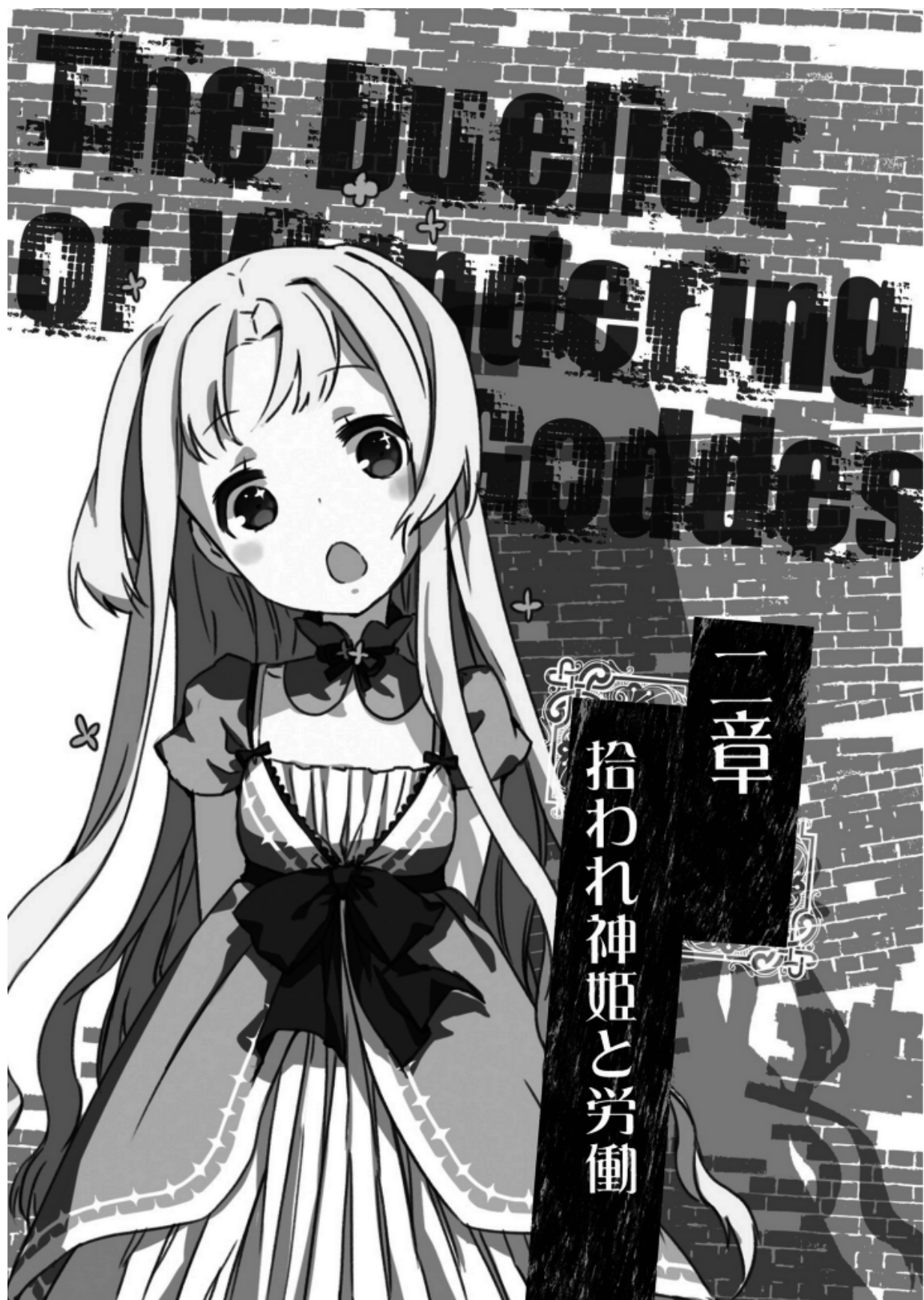
“What?”

“Even if Tina is now your property, she is still a Shinki. So what does that make you: Tina’s disciple or her master?” the self-proclaimed goddess inquired soberly.

Translator notes and references

[1] Tina tends to speak in that archaic style translators often (attempt to) use Middle English to represent. Given the fact that I’m not Chaucer, it’s far too much effort for me to want to try.

Chapter 2: The Shinki Who Was Taken In & Physical Labor



“O Shinki, Protectress of this city~” Yuuki called out calmly. “Please purify all corruption – clean the storefront, would you?”

“I will fulfill that wish, Master.”

Tina nodded energetically.

“...Now then, how do you use this thing?”

Tina raised the rag she held in hand.

She was dressed in a set of old clothes Yuuki had bought for her, with her hair tied back by a triangular handkerchief – the very picture of a girl at work.

“First, immerse the rag in the bucket of water.”

“Like this?”

“Right. Now wring it out. After that, please wipe down the sales counter.”

“Let’s see here... By the way, why the serious tone? Albertina’s given you her permission to loosen up a little, Master.”

“...It’s amazing how you can say that without sarcasm. Now, then Shinki-sama, please take down the items on the sales counter and wipe it down thoroughly. It’s quite easy for dust blown in from the outside to accumulate there. When you’re done cleaning it, return the merchandise to their places. Oh, and be careful – if things drop, they’ll break.”

“Got it.”

Tina proceeded to follow his instructions with what were frankly unreliable, unpracticed motions.

In return for his help, she’d help out around the store. On this point, the two were agreed.

Tina's appellation for Yuuki – “Master” – was a demonstration of her gratitude intended to show her respect.

He had to admit, putting aside her clumsy movements, hearing someone address him in that manner was strangely satisfying. Additionally, she did have some skill when it came to bookkeeping. If she kept at it, it wasn't a stretch of the imagination to think that she could be a merchant herself someday——

Unexpectedly, a sound came from the front door.

“Hello. Are you open?”

Franka peeked her head through the store entrance. Speaking of which, she *had* mentioned dropping by the day before——

“Oh, yeah, we're open. Welcome; come on in. It's still early – are you done raiding already?”

“Ah, no. We're still getting ready to head out. As I was getting my stuff together, I noticed the bag I keep my Divine Pearls in has a hole in it. I came to buy——”

Franka suddenly froze as she noticed Tina's presence.

“...A-A girl? T-There's a girl. In Yuuki's store – there's a girl.”

Yuuki couldn't understand what was so shocking about that, though it was true that Tina was clearly not a guy.

“When a customer comes in, greeting them with a ‘Welcome’—— Is that really all that's needed, Master?”

“Yeah, and do it with heart.”

“So she's not a customer?!” Franka yelled, covering her mouth in horror, as she weakly fell back a step. “...No, get a hold of yourself, Franka. Think it through first. She could just be a relative of his, yeah. For example, his

younger sister, or maybe his older sister...though probably not his mom. Or his wife——”

“Hey, Franka——”

“No! I won’t allow it!”

Franka suddenly opened her eyes and shouted.

“...Won’t allow what exactly?”

“Absolutely n—— Er, sorry, what was that?”

She looked to be back to normal.

“Forget it. ——Anyway, let me introduce you – this girl here’s Tina.”

“Tina...chan. ‘This girl here’ – sure sounds like you two are close. Can I ask what the r-relationship between you two is?” Franka asked, with an obviously forced smile.

As Yuuki was considering how best to explain the situation, Tina answered helpfully.

“I was bought. By Master.”

“M-Master?”

“Yuuki.”

“And what exactly did he... buy?”

“Tina’s body.”

——The room froze.

“B-B-Body...?”

“Wait, Tina.”

Tina, completely oblivious to the atmosphere in the room, continued to talk.

“Yeah, this way Master will help Tina in turn. Although, actually, to be specific, it was Tina who approached Master, saying ‘I’ll do anything, so please help me’.”

“H-Help...?”

“So, if you’re asking what the relationship between Tina and Master is, well – simply put, Tina is Master’s property. If I had any other choice, I have to admit I would have preferred not to have had to sell myself... but what doesn’t exist doesn’t exist. There weren’t any other options.”

“...”

Franka turned to Yuuki, her eyes glistening with tears.

“T-the kind Yuuki-san I knew... is he already no more? Just what happened? H-how did it come to this——”

“Haa—— Indeed... how did it come to this?”

Yuuki sighed heavily.

“I’ll go make you a cup of tea while you calm down, Franka. And Tina, you’re not allowed to speak. The more you speak, the worse things get.”

“——Alright, repeat it once more.”

After Franka had left, Yuuki sat down with Tina once more.

“Tina, she, uh, lost her memory, and Master, taking pity on her, took her in. He absolutely never did anything like buy Tina’s body.”

“Exactly. From today on, that’s your background, okay? Also, don’t call me ‘Master.’”

“Why not? A rose is a rose is a rose – and so Master is Master.”

“But——”

“There’s nothing inaccurate about it because, right now, Tina is your property.”

“The word ‘property’ is off-limits as well!”

His earlier explanation had fooled Franka.

He’d found an unconscious girl in the labyrinth. Because her identity was unclear, she was temporarily a guest in Yuuki’s home. Having lost her memories, her thoughts were a bit out of order, and so she’d occasionally say things which simply weren’t true. You couldn’t just take her words at face value.

Franka not only accepted this bogus story, but had even expressed her sympathy for Tina. Even if that was in part due to sympathy being the natural response for such a situation, Franka was also originally a very kind girl.

Although the Shinki in question was hardly pleased with the explanation he’d given, the circumstances had left no room for dissent. No matter her feelings on the matter, the fact was that her special qualities had to remain a secret.

——Yuuki’s thoughts turned to the results of their “experiments” the night before.

“This is a Reliquia known as a ‘Divine Pearl.’”

Yuuki revealed two stones the size of quail eggs, and placed them before Tina.

These were precious gems with the special characteristic of being able to store divine energy – the source of a cleric’s powers.

They were receptive to human desires, and it was using these as a medium that clerics were able to channel divine energy into Orisons. In other words, they were batteries for storing divine energy in a convenient form.

“Now, can you tell me which of these is real?”

“When you ask me which one is real, you mean to ask which one of these holds divine energy?”

Yuuki nodded his head in confirmation.

“Then both are real, although the one on the left carries a significant amount of divine energy, and the one on the right barely any at all.”

“...That’s exactly right,” Yuuki admitted.

As long as an item stored divine energy, it was known as a Reliquia, regardless of the form its container might take.

The worth of the item depended directly on the precise amount of power it held within. Priceless treasures like the Dragon Fang Gem were first-grade items, whereas the common-as-dirt light stones were the lowest – fifth-grade. The Reliquia grading system, which ranged from one to five, formed the basis of all business transactions.

Divine Pearls were items found in abundant supply within the labyrinth, and could thus be found in every store in the city, though the amount of divine energy they carried within them varied greatly. Those which stored a large amount were, of course, quite rare, and possessing the ability to survive multiple uses, their value was accordingly high.

The two Divine Pearls Yuuki held in his hands were an aptly-named, fifth-grade “garbage stone” and the store’s sole first-grade Reliquia, a high-class item of the utmost purity.

Humans lacked the ability to accurately perceive divine energy. Even clerics of the highest order could only give a rough approximation at best, and even then, only by feel.

For that reason, the vast majority of people were forced to rely on other attributes instead – size, cleanliness, damage to the item (Reliquia were very difficult items to damage, and as such, Reliquia weapons and armor were priceless treasures), and its abilities – in order to determine a Reliquia's grade.

This was the “appraisal” ability for which merchants were sought after, and of which Yuuki was particularly skilled at, to the extent that even others of his trade openly acknowledged his skill.

“...A moment's glance and you could already tell. Even I can't do something like that.”

“I wouldn't need to see them to know, Master. I can tell by using divine energy.”

“Hmm... Alright then, next test.”

Yuuki placed a silver-hilted short sword on the tabletop.

“Compared to the Divine Pearl from earlier, the quality of this one's quite a bit lower.”

“Its level is still pretty high, though.”

This was a third-grade Reliquia – a very nice weapon. In the marketplace, its value would fall somewhere between 200–300 denar – enough to feed an entire family for a month or two.

“A blade like this will slice through the hide of a low-level Void Beast like a hot knife through butter. ——Now, I want you to use this to give yourself a small cut.”

“Got it.”

Without a word of dissent, Tina reached over and slid the weapon from its sheath. Raising it aloft with her right hand, she swung it down at her left hand, still resting upon the table, without any hesitation whatsoever.

“——How is it, Master?”

“...”

The exquisitely sharp blade ran into Tina’s skin – and stopped, leaving behind not so much as a scratch.

“Tina’s protected by a force that you can’t see. A tiny amount of divine energy like this could never penetrate that protection.”

“...So that’s the ScutumHoly Shield... Indeed, it’s just as the Church teaches – as long as the ScutumHoly Shield is present, it doesn’t matter how many attackers there are – a Shinki will remain impervious to harm. I’m guessing this is the reason you were unharmed while wandering the labyrinth?”

“Does that mean you believe Tina is a Shinki now, Master?”

Tina smiled smugly.

“Not yet. There’s one last thing I’d like to confirm. ——If you’re truly a Shinki, then you can work miracles, correct?”

Master’s distrust sure is heavy, Tina mumbled as Yuuki continued to talk.

“I want you to devour this sword.”

As strange as this command was, Tina never stopped to question what he meant. As if well aware of his meaning, she took hold of the weapon.

“You just said this weapon was worth a lot – is this really okay?”

“If I want to know the truth, it’s going to cost something.”

Tina extended her hands and placed them over the blade, which began to float. Suddenly, it diffused into sparkling particles which were absorbed into her body.

——The Shinki would take the Reliquia offered them and decompose them, absorbing the divine energy stored within. Afterward, they would proceed to work all manner of miracles with the consumed power.

Though the fact that divine energy was the source of miracles, no living soul had ever before personally witnessed such a sight.

“...You really did it. Well then, do a miracle so I can see.”

The Orisons of human clerics and the miracles performed by the Shinki had several drastic differences.

The most widely known differences arose in the domain of what could be done. For example, seeing into the past or predicting the future, that which exists beyond the scope of human knowledge; changing the weather and the climate; and controlling time, a power which influenced the whole world. These acts were miracles of which only the Shinki were capable. The Orisons of human clerics were limited in scope and restricted to spells for offense, defense, and healing – things which showed their greatest effectiveness only in the context of raiding the labyrinth.

Additionally, the rate of consumption when using divine energy were orders of magnitude apart. When compared with a human cleric, a Shinki's use of power was hundred to a thousand times more efficient.

“Okay. ——Though, even if you say ‘miracle,’ I’m not quite sure what you’d like to see?”

“Anything that a human would be incapable of replicating is fine.”

“I can’t do anything large with such a tiny amount of power as this. The most I can do is something small. Since the nature of a Shinki is ‘to protect,’ I can’t cause any harm. That aside, something that normal people can’t do would be——”

“How about teleportation? I hear the Shinki can do that.”

Teleporting either people or things to another location was a phenomenon Orisons were incapable of reproducing. If such a convenient ability were accessible, the danger of the labyrinth would be lessened, to say the least. Although there were teleport points found within the labyrinth, the mechanism by which they operated was currently unknown.

When the Shinki entered the equation, however, that no longer held. Legends told of a Shinki who had teleported an entire party of endangered adventurers out of the labyrinth entirely.

“Mm. If teleportation’s what you want to see, then I can do it. I just need to confirm the distance and direction for movement, and there should be no problem.”

“And if you haven’t confirmed those things?”

“Then whatever’s being teleported disappears as normal, but never reappears.”

“That’s terrifying. ——So, what are you going to teleport to?”

“Let’s see... Ah, how about that?”

Tina indicated the Divine Pearl from earlier.

“Sure, go for it.”

Yuuki returned to the dining room and answered.

According to what Tina had explained, every Reliquia radiated with a unique divine energy signature which was what she locked on to. The stronger the power it held, the easier it was to sense – even over vast distances and with numerous obstacles in the way.

Yuuki took the Divine Pearl in hand (it should be mentioned that this was, of course, the cheap one), and hid it in a location unknown to Tina. Tina was to teleport to the Reliquia’s location, and take it from its hiding place.

——This was the test.

When Yuuki returned, he found Tina where she'd been when he left, never having moved an inch. He was sure she hadn't followed him to sneak a look.

"Tina will now teleport and return! Please wait for it, Master!"

Leaving behind those words spoken with great enthusiasm, she suddenly disappeared.

Yuuki had hidden the Divine Pearl behind the shop, high up in the slender branches of a tree reaching out over a small pool. Given Tina's small stature, he'd placed it far beyond her reach.

If she had indeed not deceived him by cloaking herself in a shield of invisibility... And if she had truly manifested the power of miracles to teleport herself over to the Divine Pearl's location——

"U-Uwaaaaaaaaaaa!"

A tragic scream erupted from the backyard, followed quickly by the sound of a large splash.

"——Then that's what would happen. In other words, that girl is the real thing..." Yuuki muttered to himself.

"...After all those tests yesterday – and even getting Tina all soaked – and even after learning that Tina can use divine energy just like a Shinki, your attitude toward Tina hasn't changed at all, Master."

As Tina walked, she vented her dissatisfaction.

"You should be more surprised, more respectful, more openly admiring."

"I'll be the first to admit I was very surprised. I can honestly say that was my first time witnessing anything like that."

"Right? So then——"

“From the very start, I’d accepted the condition of operating under the premise that ‘Tina is a Shinki.’ That’s why, even after having confirmed your power, my behavior won’t change. You follow?”

“So that’s all that being a Shinki amounts to these days…”

“Oh, I should add: from today forward, don’t consume any Reliquia or exercise your power of miracles without my permission. It’ll inevitably cause problems.”

“...I understand.”

Tina nodded awkwardly.

“If that’s Master’s command, then it can’t be helped. ——Now that that’s settled, where are we headed?”

“There are a few errands I need to run, so I figured I’d show you the city at the same time. Since you’re going to serve as a shop assistant for a while, it’d be best if you learned a bit about Solitus. It’s necessary if you’re going to be any help to me. ——Alright, first up is the Church.”

The two followed the main road to the center of town.

Tina looked around with great interest, taking in the sights.

“This is Labyrinth Way, and just as its name suggests, if you follow the road all the way, you’ll find yourself at the entrance to the labyrinth. The entire length of the path is dotted with stores that cater to adventurers.”

“Just like Master’s store, but... As far as I can tell, aren’t all of these stores much bigger than Master’s? Moreover, they have lots of customers.”

“...I’m very picky when it comes to merchandise and customers both.”

“Oh, so that’s why! That explains why there’s no need for a large shop, I see.”

Tina's innocent expression glowed with heartfelt admiration. *Seriously, not the least bit of distrust in this girl*, Yuuki muttered to himself.

Seeing her taken in so completely by his lie, he was thoroughly chagrined. He changed the topic in a hurry.

“——Okay, from here to the city center – the north face of the mountain – is Artisan Road and the housing district, as well as a few small plazas. Stores selling foodstuffs and sundries, as well as the marketplace, can all be found over there. I'll show you next time.”

Farther down Labyrinth Way was a smallish plaza wherein was located a building of pure white.

“That's the Church of the Five Holies, although the residence where the Patriarch resides is farther north, in front of the Cathedral in the public square of the Patriarch District. The building you see here is just a branch office – each district has one.”

“Right, this is a place where they worship Tina.”

“Here's where they conduct worship services and read from scripture and that sort of thing. Aside from strictly religious duties like those you'd find here, the Church is responsible for a lot of other things too: law enforcement, tax collection, public expenditures, dispute resolution, etc.”

Although the Oath Legions held jurisdiction over all that occurred within the labyrinth itself, the Church was in charge of city governance.

In Yuuki's opinion, the Church was the single entity one could least afford to have as an enemy in this entire world. With the authority of the Church, a single merchant's life could be blown away with a single breath.

“I have something to take care of inside, so wait for me here, Tina. Please don't just wander around.”

Although the knight standing guard outside the labyrinth entrance, Melchior, was also from the Church, but when it came to those things

related to faith in the Shinki, the members of the Church clergy were incomparably hardheaded and mulish. If Tina were to accompany him and – God forbid – say something she shouldn't, Yuuki didn't think he'd be able to get off scot-free.

Yuuki waited until she had both verbally expressed her consent and nodded before entering, where he was met by a young deacon.

“May the Shinki's grace rest upon you. ——How can I help you?”

“No problem at all, actually. Business has been rather good recently, so I thought I'd come express my gratitude to the Shinki, and make a small offering.”

“Many thanks for your graciousness.”

The deacon gave a light smile.

Yuuki extracted five 10-denar coins from his purse, placing them in the hands of the deacon before him. Though it pained him to do so, he nonetheless succeeded in preserving the smile on the deacon's face.

If his luck continued to be poor, then he might be forced to pawn some of the cheaper items in his store to raise money for future tax payments... But now wasn't the time to think on such things, however.

“Would you like me to record your name?”

“Just leave it anonymous. On a different note, however, I was wondering if you might join me in a little light gossip——”

“Sure, what would you like to know?”

“Have there been any major disturbances of late?”

“No, not that I can think of. It's already been five years since the last ‘Great Erosion.’ I haven't heard news of any crop failures, nor have we been visited by pestilence. In fact, it's been rather peaceful of late – we have surely been blessed by the Shinki.”

“I run a small store on Labyrinth Way; tell me, how are adventurers faring recently?”

The Church was the bridge between the Shinki and the citizens of the city, and so their relationship with the Oath Legions was especially close. That did not at all imply that their relationship was *good*, however.

More specifically, the situation within the labyrinth – which Oath Legion was ahead of the others in collecting Reliquia – was something the Church knew well. The number of merchants who wished to share in this knowledge were hardly few in number. As the Church was well-aware of this, one simply had to be rather generous in alms-giving before members of the clergy would “minister to their needs” under the pretext of making small talk.

“...Now that you mention it, I heard that the one of the main parties of the Sky’s Oath Legion suffered a devastating loss while in the labyrinth. Apparently they encountered a previously-unknown type of Void Beast. Of the five member party, four passed away, and the lone survivor – the commander – lost an arm.”

“That’s...terrible.”

This must be the ‘major incident’ that Melchior had spoken of.

“Death is in accordance with the plan outlined by the Heavenly King. Even the Shinki may not oppose his will in this matter. Fortunately, the party leader’s arm was perfectly restored with a miracle from the ‘Shinki who Supports the Sky.’ Another main party – headed by a young genius named Stefan Klose – has been appointed to investigate what happened. Any and all information on a Void Beast capable of annihilating one of the Oath Legions’ main parties is absolutely vital.”

Oh, the pride of our school, huh? Truly an up-and-coming member of the Oath Legions’ elite.

“Despite what happened, the position the Church’s ‘Sky’ faction holds atop the rest won’t change. When it comes to both the number of adventurers in

their ranks as well as the number of Reliquia they've brought back, the three other competing legions aren't even close, let alone the currently empty 'Moon.' Generally speaking, nothing's changed."

It seemed that was all he had to share. He finished speaking.

Yuuki gave his thanks and left the building.

"The five Shinki cooperate in protecting this city" – this was Church doctrine. That, however, said nothing about the Oath Legions who served the Shinki, which were engaged in fierce competition with one another.

The aforementioned incident would undoubtedly show its influence on the market.

For example, when it came to trying to sign large contracts with the Legion currently in prominence, merchants would engage in a price war, cutting prices left and right in a rush to sell them Reliquia. If the news he'd just heard spread, the opposing Legions would instead raise their prices in response.

News regarding the movements of the Oath Legions was priceless information, and something that Yuuki took care to watch closely. This time, however, he had a different goal entirely.

"Aside from that one group suffering casualties, it doesn't look like there's anything in particular going on with the Legions, which means there isn't anything strange going on in the Church either."

That implied that the five Shinki were there as normal.

That notwithstanding, he had to admit that Tina exhibited powers belonging only to the Shinki.

So just who the devil was she?

From what he'd just heard, the possibility that she'd 'been born a few days ago,' as she claimed, grew exponentially. In short, a newly born – and thus previously unknown – sixth Shinki.

“Though it’s still unconfirmed at this point, but if that’s really the case ——” Yuuki mused to himself as he returned to the plaza.

He looked around – Tina was gone.

“That idiot...”

Unable to repress the emotion, Yuuki complained aloud as he sped off in search of Tina.

Because it was the middle of the day, the plaza was extremely lively.

Just where had she gone? What had caught the interest of that Shinki? Perhaps she’d been drawn in by the enticing aroma of a food vendor’s stall, or maybe——

At that moment, Yuuki heard the sound of warm applause and an adoring crowd from behind him. Stopping, he turned around.

The first thing he saw was a large crowd gathered – they were watching a puppet show for children. The hero had just appeared, and was on the verge of dealing the finishing blow to the villain.

“Wow, so strong! He’s amazing! Is that the hero?”

“Y-yes. That’s the ‘Snow Blade King.’”

“Ooh. What’s he like?”

“About ten years ago, he was a great Duelist serving the ‘Shinki Crowned with the Moon’; his name came from the snow-white sword he wielded. Even though he was incredibly strong, he was also a very chivalrous person – kind to the weak, and one who’d never bend his morals regardless of the danger it posed——”

Yuuki spotted the back of Tina’s head, engaged in eager conversation with the girl beside her, whom was describing the characters in the show.

(Hey, aren’t those our students?)

Yuuki walked over.

“You know, Onee-san, this is really rare – for you to not even know who the ‘Snow Blade King’ is.”

“Ah yeah, that’s because I was only born a few days ago.”

“...A few days ago?”

“Yep. In the labyrinth—— Aaaaargh!”

Yuuki’s fist came down on Tina’s head from above.

“Eh? Huh? Yuuki-sensei?”

“Sorry for all the trouble this girl’s caused you, Kaya. ——Didn’t I tell you to wait for me? Let’s go.”

“J-just a little bit longer...”

Yuuki ignored her protest, dragging her behind him as he left. It wasn’t until they’d left the crowd far behind that he finally relaxed.

“That was a great show——”

“...”

“...Why are you mad, Master? Tina never mentioned anything about being a Shinki.”

“When you say crazy things like you were born just a few days ago, of course it’d raise questions!”

“Ohh...”

“When a normal person is only a few days old, they’d be nothing more than a baby. There’s no way you don’t know that? Stop playing dumb! —— Honestly, you need to realize just what a dangerous existence you are. Now, let’s go.”

“...”

Tina was silent.

Sighing worriedly, Yuuki turned to leave—— Suddenly, his sleeve was tugged from behind.

“——D-do you want to throw Tina away?” she asked with a smile.

That smile, however, was clearly forced; in fact, it pained him to see it.

“Huh?”

“Tina, s-she understands. Lending a hand to a Shinki like Tina is a burden too heavy to carry for a normal person. If... if you want to leave, then I understand.”

Tina’s hand trembled as she spoke. Running completely contrary to the words she had just uttered, it was clear that she was terrified.

“D-don’t worry; Tina is a compassionate goddess. Even if a disciple couldn’t bear the strain, and r-ran off, I wouldn’t blame him.”

“...”

This time, Yuuki was the one left wordless.

(——Oh, so that’s how it is.)

Yuuki finally understood. Even if she looked carefree on the outside, inwardly, she’d always been afraid.

Even if she was only a few days old, her mind and heart were far more developed than an infant’s. She thoroughly understood the pain and hardship of loneliness because she’d been thrown – entirely alone – into a harsh and unforgiving world. The reason she’d been so stubbornly attached to terms like “disciple” and “Master” had been because she’d needed to clearly define her relationship with others. Put simply, she’d desperately clung on to her relationship with others – her relationship with Yuuki; it had

been her one comfort – the one thing standing between her and the abyss of her overwhelming fear.

Yuuki paused for a moment before finally opening his mouth.

“——I’m sorry. I went too far.”

His words had come so far out of her range of expectation that Tina could only blink in response, her eyes still wet with tears.

“There’s no understating how seriously a merchant takes an agreement. Rest assured, I won’t simply throw you aside, nor will I simply neglect you. In other words, for the duration of our agreement, if you can, for all intents and purposes, view me as your disciple. But, you also need to remember – I’m also your master. That means when I ask, you need to obey. That’s what a good Shinki should do – honor the wishes of her followers. Sound good?”

“Yep!”

Tina, on the verge of tears just a moment before, now broke out into a radiant smile. Wiping the tears from her eyes with one hand, and seemingly unable to restrain the joyous feelings bursting forth from within, she spoke in a frenzy.

“Tina will definitely be a great Shinki! And will listen to all of Master’s commands! No matter what they may be!”

“Good. Now, let’s forget this ever happened.”

Yuuki gently patted Tina on the head. The young girl squinted her eyes as if terribly itchy.

“The puppet show’s always there. We can come back another time. —— Let’s head home.”

Tina obediently trailed after Yuuki, her hand still gripping his sleeve.

“...Um, Master?”

“What’s up?”

“Is it... really that well-known? The story from the show?”

“...Oh, you mean ‘The Snow Blade King vs. Black Demon’? Yeah, it’s a very popular story. If you’re that interested, you should have Franka take you to see it. That girl really likes this sort of thing too.”

Because he’d already told Franka about Tina’s memory loss, even if the latter said something strange, it ought to be alright.

Stories of the Shinki and their Duelists and other adventurers of legend were often used in plays. The Church, in a shameless attempt to inspire additional donations, openly encouraged the spread of such stories among the populace. These puppet shows could thus be found all over the city, and anyone interested could easily find one.

As long as she didn’t break cover, it’d be a very valuable experience for her.

“Master... won’t come?”

“Me? Oh, yeah, I’m not really interested in that kind of thing.”

“Oh.”

Tina’s smile was tinged with just a hint of regret.

The next few days passed by peacefully and without incident.

Yuuki and Tina’s relationship had gradually grown stronger.

After what had occurred a few days before, Tina had grown both far more prudent as well as forthright.

“——So basically, mushrooms grow where it’s dark and damp,” Yuuki explained to Tina, as they traversed the small mountain path.

“Some types are poisonous, others can be used as medicine, and some can even be eaten – there are many different kinds, and distinguishing between them is a very difficult task. Looking at it from a different angle, however, it’s for that very reason that they can be sold for profit. Learning which trees’ fruits can be used as medicine is much easier, so we’ll start——
What’s wrong?”

Having struggled to keep pace with Yuuki this entire time, Tina had finally exhausted herself, and was sitting, resting, on the ground.

“M... Mer...Merchants...need....” Tina wheezed, gasping for air.

“Need...to....cl...climb...”

“You’re asking if it’s common for merchants to climb mountains? No, not really. I’m a little different in that I collect my goods myself. C’mon, you can do it.”

Rather than simply stocking Reliquia, stores also sold all sorts of consumables an adventurer might need. Counting simply by volume, and not by cost, these items actually constituted the majority of store sales.

The most commonly sold items were medicines for staunching open wounds, and gauzes and compresses. Although virtually all adventurer parties necessarily included a cleric for healing, in order to avoid wasteful expenditure of Divine Pearls, anything but severe injuries were dealt with using a combination of medicine and bandages. The medicines and remedies that Yuuki sold in his store were all things that he had personally collected, thus minimizing expenditures as much as possible.

Accordingly, he had taken Tina along with him on this trip, in order to familiarize her with the various medicines he sold... unfortunately, it looked like she was now running on empty.

“Why don’t we rest for a bit——”

Rather than respond, Tina wearily lifted her canteen to her lips. It seemed she was comparatively frail even for a girl of her age and petite stature.

“...No matter who it is, if they’re not used to this kind of thing, they’d tire easily. When you first start out, there’re simply too many things you don’t know. That’s to be expected. Don’t rush yourself; take your time.”

Tina’s breathing finally returned to normal, and she asked, “Master, were you like this when you first started too?”

“Well, compared to you, I was in better physical condition, but because I was completely unfamiliar with herbology, I was frequently smacked around by the previous shop owner.”

“The previous owner?”

“The store’s sign reads, ‘Shophe Boris,’ right? The shop originally belonged to an old man named Boris. At the time I was a wanderer with neither family nor a place to call home. One day, when Gramps was out gathering medicinal herbs, he found me collapsed on the mountainside and brought me home with him.”

That was five long years ago. He’d displayed a strength unexpected for someone of his seasoned age, and had carried Yuuki back to his store.

“He then hired me, and taught me how to work the store. Man, he sure was one strict old man – I’d frequently get scolded like you wouldn’t believe. Still... I’m grateful for everything he did for me.”

In more ways than one, he’d been the one to teach Yuuki how to live a normal life.

“So where’s he now?”

“He passed away two years ago.”

He’d had a stroke. One day he’d suddenly vomited forcefully, and passed out. He didn’t wake during the next few days either, and eventually, he simply stopped breathing. The one blessing of the ordeal had been that he hadn’t been awake to feel any pain, nor had he had to deal with the terror of death.

“I inherited the store, although from the very beginning, there was never any chance I could be like him. Even if my body’s grown a lot since then, I’m still a long way from being able to compete with any of the big businessmen; I’m still green.”

“...So that’s how it works. People just inherit what other people have built, huh?” Tina mumbled to herself, with a look of admiration on her face.

Breathing deeply, she suddenly rose to her feet.

“Alright, Master. Tina’s ready to go. Our goal’s the summit, right? We’d better get going.”

“Oh, ok. It’s just——”

“Hmm...?”

Tina’s body began to wobble. To her immediate left was a sharp, vertical incline, far below which lay a valley. Her tiny frame began to fall off the precipice, her legs touching nothing but empty air——

Suddenly her descent was interrupted.

——She hadn’t fallen.

“Suddenly standing like that made my head spin.”

“Hah...”

Yuuki’s left hand gripped a tree branch, and his right arm was securely fastened around her.

As she’d started to lose her balance, he’d raced over and grabbed her. Although his footing had been a bit unsteady, he’d relied on his sense of balance to make the save.

“Even if your pulse and breathing have returned to normal, there’s no way spent physical energy returns that fast. Even if you felt okay, don’t push

yourself past your limits. This is one of the most fundamental rules for traveling in the mountains or in the labyrinth.”

“I-I’ll remember that.”

Tina reddened.

“B-But! Even if I’d fallen, I’d still have the ScutumHoly Shield to protect me; I wouldn’t have been injured! Tina’s a Shinki, you know!”

“Sure, but how would you have gotten back up?”

“U-Um, well——”

Looking down at the valley below, she started to tremble.

“L-Let’s get going, Master! I-It’s too high...I-It’s scary——”

“Oh, right. You don’t need to summit the mountain to see. Take a look, over there.”

Cutting short Tina’s words, he pointed.

The horizon could be seen in the distance. Over that way, where the heavens met the earth, a horrifying black mist enveloped the earth, and slowly, ever so slowly, squirming closer.

“‘The Devourer’...”

“You know what it is?”

“Yes. It devours everything in its path as it slowly creeps forward. It’s a hollow void, without purpose. Checking its advance with barriers is one of the duties of the Shinki.”

The entire population of Solitus, including surrounding villages, numbered around two hundred thousand.

It was bordered on the east and north by mountains, on the south by a vast plain, and on the west by a river that fed into the sea. Crossing on foot from border to border was about a three-day journey. Finally, running far below Solitus was the labyrinth.

——That was the entirety of their world.

The rest of their world had been consumed by the Devourer, leaving nothing behind, or so the tale went.

When it was said that the Shinki protected the city, that was meant literally, and not just figuratively. The barriers they maintained were all that stopped the encroachment of the Devourer.

That was the reason for the existence of the adventurers, and the Oath Legions in particular. If they were to stop providing the Shinki with Reliquia, thus allowing their supply of divine energy to run dry, then they'd cease to be able to produce miracles; more simply put, they'd cease to be able to power the barriers.

Complicating the situation, with humanity trapped in an enclosed space, a scarcity of food, the threat of pestilence, and natural disasters stood posed to quickly exterminate what was left of humanity. Again, the power of miracles – and by extension, the Shinki – was necessary to prevent this apocalyptic outcome. This, too, required divine energy, and consequently, Reliquia.

It was rumored that the Reliquia absorbed by the Shinki were reborn once more within the walls of the labyrinth. While it was impossible to validate this hypothesis, the fact of the matter was that despite years of industrious raiding by adventurers, the labyrinth had yet to show any signs of Reliquia depletion.

“And finally, there shall come the day when the Shinki shall lead mankind to the end of the labyrinth – and to salvation in a new world,” Tina whispered softly.

Salvation – escape from this confined world which was gradually dying by degrees. Legend had it that such could be found at the end of the labyrinth – that the labyrinth itself was but the entrance to another world. For this reason, it had been named the Magna PortaGreat Gate.

In this manner, the success of the adventurers directly correlated to the continued survival of humanity.

“Tina will definitely save everyone. It’s for that reason that the Shinki exist.”

“...And yet, without divine energy, nothing can be done at all.”

“Mm.”

Yuuki deftly brought Tina back to the present – to the mountain road by the cliff-side.

“Your first step is to do your best at learning the job. If you can help the store bring in money, I’ll repay you with Reliquia, so hang in there.”

“Hello every—— Er, wait, what’s the matter...? Are you alright?”

Sticking her head through the store entrance in greeting, Franka suddenly called out worriedly.

A girl lay collapsed on the floor.

“...I’m exhausted, so I’m laying here until my energy returns. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Since the person in question was the one reassuring her, Franka relaxed slightly, but the look of worry never left her face as she walked through the doorway.

“Earlier today, we went to the mountain to pick some medicinal herbs, which is why she’s so tired. ——Hey Tina, if you’re about ready to surrender, you can go ahead and take a break.”

“——!”

At Yuuki’s words, Tina leapt to her feet energetically.

“It’s still early for that! Master, please give me your next order.”

“Ohh, impressive. Alright then, grab some of the light stones from the storehouse and restock the shelves. When you’re finished with that, you’re done, so feel free to rest.”

Watching Tina’s swaying figure head into the room, Franka’s mouth gaped open in surprise.

“Y-You’re really working hard, aren’t you, Tina-chan?”

“It’s great, isn’t it? ——Done raiding already?”

Franka was currently dressed in loose, flowing robes, her pack on her back.

It was almost dusk, the time when most adventurers chose to call it a day. Not that it was a rule – it had simply become a de facto policy to align their schedule around the working hours of the others in their lives, including their families and the stores that filled the city.

“Yeah, although we didn’t really see much success today, unfortunately,” Franka answered, with a wry smile. “Master Alfred said he’d be along shortly as well. ——Oh, that reminds me – I haven’t seen that much of you at school recently. Is that because you’ve been doing things together with Tina-chan?”

“Yep. There’s a lot she still needs to be taught, so I’ve taken a few days off to show her the ropes.”

It went without saying that he hadn’t bothered keeping up with his training either, though that was no different from normal.

“Oh no. Please don’t tell me you prepared food for me again?”

“No! I didn’t!”

Franka blushed a deep red.

“That, um, that was just something I did on my own. Don’t worry about it.”

“Sorry for making you worry. You should know, though – I probably won’t be attending class for the next little while.”

He felt uneasy about leaving Tina to watch the shop while he went off to school. At the very least, he’d like for her to learn enough to bring in enough for food on her own.

“I think that this part of you, the part that won’t abandon people who need your help, is just amazing. You even saved me. But still, it must be so hard...”

Franka bowed her head. A moment passed before she, seemingly having come to some sort of decision, raised her head once more.

“Um, you know, maybe I’m being a bit nosy here, but I-I’d like to help out if I can. If nothing else, I can make food for the two of——”

The door suddenly opened, cutting Franka off.

“Yo, long time no see——”

A man of about thirty or so walked in. At his left hip was a sword, currently sheathed in a scabbard. He was a bit slender, but tall. He felt quite approachable, and the utter lack of intensity in his expression gave him a somewhat lethargic quality.

Alfred. A third-ranked adventurer – a warrior. He was Franka’s mentor in labyrinth raiding.

“Oh, hey there, Uncle^[1]. Welcome.”

“How’s business? Keep at it—— Eh? What’s wrong, Franka?”

“...Nothing. Just forget about it,” Franka mumbled dejectedly.

“So can I help you find something? Or did you perhaps chance upon a Reliquia?”

“I haven’t had much luck in the latter department of late, I’m afraid. No, I’m here to pick up some light stones.”

“If it’s light stones you need, they should be out shortly. Please wait just a moment.”

“No problem. ——I have to say, though: to be frank, business seems pretty poor. If Old Man Boris was still around, you’d be in for a beating, you know?”

He’d already frequented the store even when it had been under the management of the previous owner, so he didn’t feel the need to couch his words.

Alfred was unaffiliated with any particular adventurer group – a freelance adventurer. Although he was very experienced, he generally avoided the lower levels of the labyrinth. According to the person himself, he wasn’t interested in great wealth; supporting his day to day life was enough.

Although the training school taught both theory and fundamentals, true combat experience could only be had within the labyrinth itself. As such, it was very common for trainees to accompany more experienced adventurers in their travels. For this reason, “mentor” was actually a rather common profession among adventurers.

Alfred was one such example. His reputation wasn’t anything near that of the Oath Legions, but Boris had had an unshakable trust in him.

Even if Franka had formed a party with her friends from the training school, she still spent a considerable amount of time under Alfred’s tutelage. As her mentor put it, “even though Franka is tremendously talented, her greatest strength is instead her dedication to self-improvement.”

At that time, Tina walked in. Although the light stone-filled wood basket she was carrying wasn’t all that heavy, she nonetheless swayed dangerously

as she walked, likely a consequence of her extreme physical exhaustion.

“Waa——”

“Watch out!”

Just as Tina lost her balance and was about to fall, Franka hurried over and steadied her.

Tina, who had come perilously close to a bad fall, could only stare blankly, as if what had happened still hadn’t quite registered.

“Tina, you’re being rude.”

“T-thank you very much, um, Franka.”

“No problem,” Franka laughed.

“Tina-chan, her name was? Hmm... That’s a real cutie you’re taking care of there,” Alfred remarked.

“That sounds pretty creepy when you say it, Uncle.”

“I prefer my women more mature and full-bodied, thank you very much. Anyway, I’m married.”

“...You’re married? Don’t tell me you even have kids?”

“No, no children. ——Going back a bit, I heard tell you’re taking care of her because she lost her memory?”

“Eh? But Tina hasn’t lost her mem——”

Her words cut off as she noticed Yuuki’s glare.

“Oh, right, right. Forget what I just said – I definitely lost my memory. Yep, memory’s all gone. For sure.”

“I figured it wouldn’t hurt to have some extra help around the store, so I gave her a place to stay. It was a simple decision based on costs vs. benefits.”

Yuuki preempted Alfred’s line of questioning with a change of topic.

“She’s definitely a bit strange, but she doesn’t mean any harm, so please go easy on her, Uncle.”

“Like that had to be said. ——I’m Alfred, an adventurer. It’s a pleasure to meet you, little lady.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, Alfred!”

Alfred flashed Tina a quick smile before turning to face Yuuki once more.

“——So if I understand this correctly, you’re waiting until she can take care of the store on her own before you return to being a full-time adventurer?”

“...More like I never intended to be a full-time adventurer from the start. I’m a merchant. Even on the rare occasion I set foot in the labyrinth, it’s only for the sake of my business.”

“An adventurer’s qualifications aren’t easy to come by. You should form a party with us. If we had another forward guard, we could do so much more. Plus, it’d make Franka happy.”

Every now and then Alfred would try to persuade Yuuki in this way, although he could never tell if the offer was serious or not.

“Uncle, are you seriously asking a support specialist to wave a sword around?”

“Of course not. No, you definitely won’t be letting any swords wave – you’re young and strong after all.”

Alfred smiled lightly, his searching gaze never leaving Yuuki for a moment.

Even if the other party was a lax, harmless middle-aged man, at times like these, Yuuki wasn't quite sure what to think.

“...On that note, haven't you been having problems finding any Reliquia recently? Today as well. Before you worry about whether or not I should join you guys, shouldn't you first worry about yourself?”

“Well, that's because there've been some, shall we say, extenuating circumstances of late?”

A disaffected expression took hold of his face.

“Recently, the Oath Legions, and the Sky Legion in particular, have been far more bloodthirsty than normal. It feels a little dangerous, so I've been trying to keep my trips to the labyrinth short. I'm not quite sure what the cause is, though.”

“I heard that they recently ran into a new kind of Void Beast. There were casualties.”

“So that's why. That explains the serious attitude: the one thing they will not tolerate is damage to their reputation. That doesn't have anything to do with us unaffiliated adventurers, though.”

Franka and Tina placed the light stones on the counter.

“I'll take these light stones. —Oh, also, the short sword I've been using broke. I seem to recall you had a pretty good third-grade Reliquia here, right? A silver one. Could I take a look?”

“...Oh, that one. Sorry, it's been sold already.”

To be precise, it had been consumed – by Tina, a few days earlier during their run of tests.

“Oh, that's too bad. I didn't think anyone else even knew about this place. Have you had new customers lately?”

“I wish...”

Customers didn't come for the store so much as they came for the store personnel, so when Boris had passed away, the store's business had soon followed. To this day, Yuuki hadn't managed to find enough new customers to fill that gap. It was simply too obvious to anyone that when it came to his ability as a store owner, he was both young and inexperienced.

The only reason he'd made it this far had been thanks to the store regulars – like Alfred – who'd been frequenting the store since Boris' days. Even as he felt deep gratitude for their help, he was filled with deep concern over his own uselessness.

“Why don't I take out what swords I do have on hand for you to look over?”

Just as Yuuki made this suggestion in an attempt to dispel the gloomy atmosphere, the door suddenly opened.

“Pardon the intrusion.”

With those words, a group of adventurers entered the store.

It was a party of five. Their armor was clearly engraved with an eye-catching emblem. These were they who served the Shinki of the Sky – the Sky's Oath Legion.

The person in front was someone he knew – Stefan Klose.

Yuuki frowned. Franka froze when she saw who it was.

Stefan spared her a quick glance before walking directly over to stand before Alfred.

“It's been a while.”

Although the voice was strong and clear, it was strangely devoid of emotion.

“...Ah. Stefan.”

Alfred returned the greeting, albeit with a hint of reluctance. It seemed they knew each other.

“I saw you come in here. ...I have something I’d like to say.”

“Make it brief.”

Alfred sighed, his lack of interest plain to see. The two walked over to a corner of the shop and began to converse.

“——Franka? What’s wrong?” Tina asked Franka, whom was frozen with a blank look on her face.

Franka came to herself and smiled.

“Nothing, sorry. This should be enough light stones. Let’s return the rest to the storehouse.”

The two girls began to collect the extra light stones.

The Oath Legion members, Stefan excepted, were disinterestedly taking measure of the store merchandise around them. There didn’t look to be the least interest in making a purchase. There simply wasn’t any chance these shelves would hold anything precious enough to be of interest to a front-line adventurer.

Can’t they just hurry up and beat it? Yuuki complained inwardly to himself.

At that moment——

“Ah——!”

Tina suddenly cried out.

“You, I remember you! Even after Tina saved you, you ran off all by yourself without so much as a word of thanks! Rudeness has its limits, you know?!”

The one she was pointing to was a vicious-looking, 25-year old man. His equipment declared him a swordsman. His formerly idle manner turned to displeasure as he shouted back, “What the hell are you talking about, you stupid brat? I’ve never seen you be——”

“No! Tina remembers! Back in the labyrinth—— urgh!”

Yuuki dashed over and clamped his hand over Tina’s mouth. He put on a fawning smile as he grappled with the struggling young girl.

“Oh my, I’m terribly sorry. This girl isn’t quite right in the head, if you know what I mean. Sometimes she’ll get people confused and run over and say the craziest things.”

“——She works for this store, doesn’t she? You need to educate her better! Idiot.”

The man clicked his tongue angrily, and gave the near wall a ferocious kick.

The matter looking to be settled, Yuuki sighed in relief—— Until someone fanned the flames with vigor.

“Ho? What’s that? Bertolt, don’t tell me you laid your hands on that little brat? You have some seriously good taste – guess running away with your tail between your legs wasn’t enough for you, was it, you gutless has-been?”

The party didn’t seemed to have much in the way of unity, having set upon one another with great vulgarity.

The instigator was a dark-skinned young man with a large sword on his back.

The one being mocked – who was apparently named Bertolt – reached for the sword at his hip with a look of absolute rage on his face.

“You trying to make a fool of me, Jahar?!”

“And if I am?”

The so-named Jahar simply laughed in response.

“Hey, you two——”

Please stop, Yuuki almost sobbed. If they fought here, there’d be nothing left of his poor shop.

Suddenly, a gust of wind blew by his ear.

A silver flash flew between Bertolt and Jahar, leaving a hole in the wall.

“The two of you – watch your mouths. Your behavior is a disgrace to the entire Legion.”

The cold, emotionless words had, of course, come from Stefan, whom had, at some unknown time, taken hold of a blue spear.

——Not only had he been empty-handed just a moment before, he hadn’t had any weapons at his waist or on his back either.

After verifying that both Bertolt and Jahar had heeded his orders, he waved his hand and the spear disappeared without a trace.

Their party leader was definitely in full control of the situation. Though he looked to be the youngest of the group, he nevertheless evinced leadership qualities entirely unexpected for someone his age.

His gaze returned to Alfred once more.

“Stop wasting your time in a place such as this. Come back to where you belong. The worth of an adventurer isn’t a measure of effort or process, but of results. Mentoring those without experience is simply a waste of time.

——Come to your senses already, Alfred.”

Stefan then turned to leave.

“Hey, hold it just a moment there, Legionnaires.”

Yuuki called out from behind him. He waited until Stefan turned back to look before continuing.

“You put a hole in the wall of my shop – please don’t tell me you were just going to leave it like that?”

“...My apologies,” Stefan said, taken aback. “Though I must say I don’t think a hole like that will diminish the value of this place any further.”

He nevertheless pressed a silver coin into Yuuki’s outstretched hand.

The matter now resolved, the party exited the store as one.

“Sorry about that. I’ve inconvenienced you.”

Alfred broke the silence with a bitter laugh.

“You sure did, Uncle. I didn’t know you had dealings with the Oath Legions?”

“In the past.”

Alfred was reluctant to speak further, and Yuuki was even less desirous to pry.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH! ———Those guys were so rude!”

In their place, Tina filled the silence with a yell.

“Master’s just as bad! How could you take their dirty money?”

“I live my life such that whatever people give me, I’ll take,” Yuuki shrugged.

As Stefan had said, it wasn’t like the hole was that big of a deal, but given the disturbance they’d just caused, Yuuki hadn’t been willing to just let them go.

“More importantly, however, it’s best not to anger the Oath Legions. There wasn’t anything else we could have done,” Franka tried to assuage Tina, though everyone could see her smile was forced.

That reminds me—— This girl reacted really strangely to them coming in, Yuuki suddenly realized. *She seems to be back to normal, but what the heck was that...*

“Aren’t you mad, Franka? They said you didn’t have any experience!”

“When compared to them, it’s true that my level’s lower...”

Franka was a rank four adventurer. Stefan was a first-rank, and the others surrounding him were rank threes. This city continued to exist due to the support of the Oath Legions who collected Reliquia from the Labyrinth. Relatively speaking, this afforded them a position higher even than the clouds in the sky.

“...So Uncle, what did they want with you?”

“Oh, supposedly there’s been another victim. The same Void Beast, apparently. They asked what I knew about the incident. The trail looks to have run cold, so they’ve been forced to ask other high-ranked adventurers for intel. I believe it happened around the sixtieth-floor this time.”

There was a plan in place to hunt and suppress the Void Beast in question, but whether or not they understood its characteristics and attack patterns when they made their counterattack would make all the difference. For that reason, that they would seek any and all information they could come as no surprise.

“I haven’t set foot in the deeper levels in a long time, so I couldn’t give them what they wanted. ——Oh, by the way, one of them was named Bertolt, right? He’s the party leader of the group that was nearly annihilated. From what he said, the Void Beast in question is humanoid, and could use skills very similar to Orisons – a power we’ve never before seen until now.”

“Bertolt...” Franka murmured.

Alfred frowned, and turned to look at her.

“...Ah, never mind. It’s nothing; please continue.”

“Are you sure? ——Well anyway, after the humanoid Void Beast saw him, it smiled. If what he says is true, then it means this one’s possesses a surprising degree of intelligence.”

A Void Beast with a level of intelligence on par with that of humans had yet to be seen. If this was truly the case, this was huge.

“Bertolt’s joined Stefan’s party in preparation for a raid on that Void Beast’s hunting grounds. In any case, none of this has anything to do with us. There’s no need to start watching our backs,” Alfred joked with a smile.

“...What on Earth happened between you?” Yuuki asked Tina, after Alfred and the others had all left.

She was every bit as angry as she’d been earlier.

“——Tina tried to save them,” she answered.

With a look of displeasure on her face, she began to explain.

Within the heart of the vast labyrinth room grew a large tree. It had been inside of a hole in that tree that she’d awoken.

Emerging from her natural cradle, she’d looked around and taken in her surroundings. The floor and walls were covered with plants, with what looked like a large stone monument in the corner where the walls met. Aside from herself, the room was devoid of movement.

She, who had only just come to the knowledge of her own existence, had nothing save the cloth she was enrobed in.

But she did not despair, for she was filled with the knowledge of her identity and of her purpose.

First things first, she needed to summon the Duelist who served her. Because the Shinki were incapable of harming others, they needed a guard.

She would journey to Solitus, and defeat her enemy.

Closing her eyes, she began to concentrate the divine energy she held within her.

——At that precise moment.

Her focus was disrupted. She'd heard a frantic plea for help – a prayer to the Shinki.

She hesitated for but a moment.

There was no time to wait for the summoning to finish. She hurried to the scene herself. Even if it took every last ounce of divine energy she had, she'd save him.

She was, after all, a Shinki – a protector of the city and its people.

“By the time Tina teleported there, the Void Beast, a large lizard, had already killed several people. Although I was pretty unnerved, I knew I had to save at least one of them, no matter what it took. ——I managed to make it in time to seal the Void Beast, teleporting it somewhere far away. I finally relaxed; it was okay if I just let my divine energy recover little by little. The most important thing was that I, a Shinki, was needed by someone – had saved someone. I was happy.”

Filled with joy, Tina had smiled. All that was left was to accompany the man she had rescued back to town.

Unfortunately, however... things took an unexpected turn. Bertolt had confused Tina for a Void Beast, and had bolted away on his own.

Tina had exhausted her reserve of divine energy, and having been cast aside by someone she'd saved, she'd wandered the labyrinth, lost. She had been in no danger, of course, but she was still susceptible to fatigue and hunger. —Eventually, she'd simply run out of energy.

“And then I found you. So that's what happened.”

The loss of Bertolt's arm – due to the chaotic jumble of misinformation being spread – had been incorrectly attributed to Tina. What terrible slander.

“That's why! —That's why Tina is so mad! Those guys are so ungrateful! You understand, right, Master?!”

Her shoulders trembled as she breathed and her eyes stared directly at Yuuki.

“Mm, yeah. I understand. That's why you're angry. You've done well.”

Yuuki pondered for a moment before continuing.

“This is really an unfortunate misunderstanding, however. I don't think he meant any harm.”

Even if that Bertolt fellow hadn't exactly been a man of noble character... this necessitated a different level of malice entirely.

“So are you saying that Tina's wrong, Master?”

“Why do you have to interpret things that way? I just think that your anger won't change a thing. There are as many different ways to look at things as there are people in the world, and not everyone sees things the same way. That's why misunderstandings and contention often occur – particularly in a place as populated as this city. It happens all the time.”

“Mm...”

“If you were to get angry every time someone misunderstood you, then you'd never find time for anything else. If you're never going to run into

them again, it's best to simply forget about it. That's the best thing you can do for yourself."

In any case, it's not like there was any obligation to correct the misunderstanding. When it came to the new type of Void Beast, the Oath Legion elite would eventually more or less figure things out. Tina, too, had learned something about the way society operated. Things had concluded rather nicely.

——Or so he was convinced at the time.

Translator notes and references

^[1]Tina tends to speak in that archaic style translators often (attempt to) use Middle English to represent. Given the fact that I'm not Chaucer, it's far too much effort for me to want to try. In case it was unclear, Alfred and Yuuki aren't actually related. The term used here is おっさん, which you'd use to refer to a middle-aged man. I've used this term since it's a fairly cross-cultural practice to refer to close, older non-relatives as "Uncle" or "Aunt" as a gesture of respect (though it has to be said that Yuuki's not being entirely respectful here...).

Chapter 3: Sky's Oath Legion



空の誓約団

二章

The subterranean labyrinth of unknown depth – the Magna PortaGreat Gate.

The first three floors of the labyrinth had been tamed by the Church of the Five Holies.

Light stone lamps were installed along the walls, and Church knights patrolled the corridors. What few Void Beasts could be found in these levels were easily driven off.

To the experienced adventurer, walking these halls was no more dangerous than a light stroll after dinner.

“W-Why? The...Shinki...originally...”

Tina was completely out of breath, but apparently not so much that she couldn’t complain. Even though her endurance was decidedly lacking, since the road didn’t have the uphill slope of the mountain they’d climbed, the trip had not completely exhausted her.

“Just...accepted...Reliquia... As offerings!”

“Well, no one’s giving you any offerings, now are they? That’s why you have to go and get them yourself.”

Yuuki had applied for a temporary adventurer’s permit from the Church on Tina’s behalf.

Temporary permits required that the holder be accompanied by the guarantor whenever entering the labyrinth. Requiring full adventurer permits of support staff such as construction workers or transport personnel was unreasonable, which had led to the creation of this system.

As they reached the third floor, Yuuki having indicated that she could now take a rest, Tina leaned against the stone wall before slowly sliding down to sit on the floor.

“J-just a...little...farther...”

“Here’s fine already. You know, didn’t you already wander the labyrinth once already? Those floors should have been much harder going.”

“You mean when I saved that thankless cur? I don’t really remember that much, to be honest; I was just so desperate. I don’t even remember how many floors I climbed...”

“And that’s exactly why you need to exercise a little. ——Tell me, how much do you know about the labyrinth?”

Tina took a moment’s consideration before responding.

“There’s Reliquia in here.”

“That’s it?”

“Um, Reliquia hold divine energy, which is Tina’s power.”

“How amazingly self-centered, but you’re right. ——Just one point of clarification, though: not everything you find in here holds divine energy. Also, the things that do can vary greatly when it comes to how much divine energy they possess. Normal people aren’t like you – we can’t simply sense divine energy, but by assessing the outward appearance of the Reliquia, we can make educated guesses about how much divine power is present.”

The city was filled with stores which both appraised and bought Reliquia.

The Church and the Oath Legions were, of course, the largest such organizations, but on occasion, individual stores could offer more precise appraisals resulting in higher prices for the seller. For this reason, small shopkeepers all relied on their skill at appraisal to garner goodwill – the catalyst for obtaining more customers and business.

“Some types of Void Beasts have a habit of collecting Reliquia. Generally speaking, the more powerful the Void Beast, the more powerful the Reliquia it likes to collect. It’s for the sake of obtaining those Reliquia that defeating Void Beasts is necessary.”

Accordingly, those who intended to get rich quickly necessarily sought out powerful companions in order to minimize the danger they faced. Consequently, high-ranked adventurers were in great demand.

“Hmm, so the reason Master enters the labyrinth alone is because you’re only a ninth-rank? There’s no one who will form a party with you?”

“...You really don’t hold back, do you? But yes, you’re right.”

A student with a low-rank might as well not exist as far as the other student trainees were concerned. It went without saying that he had never been invited to join a group.

The only exception had been Alfred, the weirdo.

“I’m fine with it. I’ve always been self-reliant. Anyway, my plan is to never engage a Void Beast in battle in the first place. ——Speaking of which, I hear the Shinki can’t harm others. Does that extend to Void Beasts as well?”

“Yes. There’s a powerful restriction against causing harm instilled deep within us. That said, we can still defend against them with protective shields, seal their actions with the power of miracles, or even teleport them somewhere far away——”

“And to do any of that, you’d need to consume Reliquia first. Hrm. ——I’d been wondering if there was a way to leverage your powers, but it seems like they’re ill-suited to raiding.”

“That’s why the Shinki have to rely on adventurers’ offerings of Reliquia. ——Right, that reminds me. The stronger the adventurer, the more powerful the Reliquia they have, correct? If that’s the case, then that Stefan guy from yesterday should be pretty strong, right?”

“Ah, you mean that spear?”

“Yeah, there was an enormous amount of divine energy within it. I think there was even enough divine energy to summon a Duelist...”

“That’s a celestial Dragon Fang weapon. Are you familiar with them?”

“I know them.”

There was a particular type of Reliquia known as a Dragon Fang Gem.

Their shape, the staggering amount of divine energy they held, the fact that there were but twelve of them in existence, or that they were each guarded by huge, terrifying Void Beasts known as Void Dragons – these things were the stuff of legends. Yuuki, of course, had no more idea than anyone else how to go about obtaining one.

The celestial Dragon Fang weapons were crafted by the Shinki, whose use of divine energy coupled with a Dragon Fang Gem resulted in the creation of the aforementioned weapons. These were legendary Reliquia weapons of the utmost rarity.

The hallmarks of such weapons included their supernatural sharpness, light weight, and durability. They were normally formless, but would manifest in accordance with their master’s will.

Perhaps the greatest testament to their awe-inspiring power was that these weapons could penetrate even the ScutumHoly Shield.

The Shinki, their Duelists, and some high-ranked Void Beasts possessed an invisible protective shield known as the ScutumHoly Shield. As their name suggested, these were almighty shields. Unless a Reliquia possessed an abundance of divine energy, it could not pierce through a ScutumHoly Shield. The ScutumHoly Shield of the Shinkis was of the highest order, and it was rumored that only a celestial Dragon Fang weapon was capable of damaging one.

The personal weapons of the five Duelists were celestial Dragon Fang weapons. If there were additional celestial Dragon Fang weapons to be had, it was said that the Shinki would bestow them upon adventurers of exceptional power and ability. From the perspective of an adventurer, the granting of a celestial Dragon Fang weapon was evidence of both one’s absolute strength as well as the trust of the Shinki – an honor above any other.

The spear wielded by Stefan was likely a gift from the “Shinki who Supports the Sky.”

This meant that the Shinki in question felt him worthy of such a weapon. In other words, that eerily detached man was truly the best of the best.

“That’s... probably very expensive, right? That spear?”

“That is without a doubt, the very top of first-grade Reliquia – a priceless treasure. Not that anyone would ever sell one in the first place. I could sell every item I own, everything in the store, and it wouldn’t be worth the ornamentation on that spear’s hilt.”

“Oh...”

“That is to say, stop dreaming, and work hard at earning money little by little. The labyrinth has medicinal herbs and other things of great value. First, focus on learning what those herbs are and where they grow. —— Okay, it’s about time for us to get going again.”

“Ah, w-wait for me, Master!”

Tina propped herself up with a large stone by her side and, standing, frantically chased after Yuuki.

The pair continued on until finally arriving at the stairway to the fourth level, eventually running into several groups of unhappy adventurers on their way back.

“Did something happen? Did a Void Beast appear or something?” Yuuki grabbed someone and asked.

Mishaps weren’t common on these floors, so when large accidents or strange things occurred, adventurers were to do their best to spread the news. This was an unwritten rule for them.

“Ah, no. Some adventurers have gotten in a fight in front of the stairway. Both parties are from the Oath Legions. There’s no getting through.”

“Oh, wow. That sure is a pain.”

Yuuki thanked the leaving adventurers and turned to Tina.

“It’s not a Void Beast, but a fight between adventurers.”

“Why would adventurers ever fight each other? Did someone try to steal something from someone else?”

“That does happen on occasion, but this time——”

Yuuki thought for a moment, and then continued.

“You know what? Let’s check it out. It’s probably best if you see something like this at least once.”

As the two traveled a short distance into the fourth level, they heard the sounds of an ongoing commotion.

Just as they’d heard, there were two parties glaring at one another, on the verge of attacking one another.

Because this was one of the earlier floors, there was quite a crowd assembled.

Finding a crack in the wall of onlookers, Tina squeezed her way to the front for a better view—— Suddenly, she frowned.

“Aren’t they... the guys from yesterday?”

“Looks like it.”

The first involved party was the Sky’s Oath Legion, or more specifically, the party of them that had visited Yuuki’s store the day before.

Stefan, the party leader; Jahar, with his enormous sword; Bertolt, gaze as ferocious as ever; and two clerics.

“The other side seems to be from the Star’s Oath Legion?”

In other words, they were the direct subordinates of the “Shinki who Scatters the Stars,” or so Yuuki determined, judging by the emblem emblazoned on their armor. Three stood together in front, with two taking up the rear. Their party composition was identical to Stefan’s.

“While none of the unaffiliated, freelancer adventurers share these feelings, the Oath Legions are highly antagonistic toward one another. Within the labyrinth, their respective territories are clearly defined. For the most part, the Legions make every effort to avoid entering another Legion’s territory, and try to be on their best behavior whenever circumstances necessitate they do so. That notwithstanding, however, small conflicts break out all the time along territorial borders; this is something that happens a lot.”

“How foolish...”

“I think so too, but these conflicts never cease. Perhaps it’s mankind’s karma. —Anyway, this area should be under the jurisdiction of the Sky’s Oath Legion – Stefan, in other words. Those Star guys must be the ones trying to provoke a fight.”

Although the Church publicly advocated cooperation between the Legions, in several different ways it actually encouraged conflict between them. It was a simple fact that competition drove up the rate at which Reliquia were collected.

The Church was fully aware of the movements of each of the Legions. That was to say that the annihilation of Bertolt’s party, the incident from which only one person had returned – and that by sheer luck, was of course known to all other factions. Even Yuuki, a smalltime merchant, had heard the news, so in that respect, what was even now taking place had been inevitable really.

It wasn’t as if they were really looking for a fight; they were simply exploiting the opportunity to mock the other party – to humiliate them. That there were those who were motivated by such things wasn’t hard to imagine.

The reason “small” conflicts were common was because neither party involved wanted to let things get too far; they knew when to stop... but now

“What the hell did you just say, you bastard?!” someone from the Star’s Oath Legion screamed.

“Nothing more than the truth. For someone like you to try and stand in my way is a vast overestimation of your ability. Move,” Stefan commanded dispassionately.

He hadn’t bothered to mask his contempt.

“——Just try me then. Warning, though – you might just lose your life, you stupid brat.”

His lips curling mockingly, the other man brandished his sword.

Yuuki noticed that he recognized the people from the Star’s Oath Legion. It was Jumbo and his buddies – the Legionnaires Yuuki had encountered when he’d brought the beginning-class students to visit the labyrinth.

The shouts and cheers of an irresponsible crowd gave him a sense of foreboding, and he frowned slightly.

Shouts of “*Die, you bastard!*” and “*I’ll kill you!*” were all too common in these settings, though things never turned out that way, of course. If every dispute turned into a massacre, no one would stand for it. Killing aside, no one wanted to be killed over something so trivial either.

People knew when enough was enough, and so these conflicts were generally kept within reason. The two parties would endlessly probe the limits of one another’s patience, making sure to reach a compromise before things ever went too far. This, too, was an unwritten rule.

That said, there were times when one party simply didn’t know when to quit.

“The Shinki emphasize cooperation between the Legions, so are we not comrades? Must there be this hostility?” Stefan asked softly.

“Comrades? Screw that, moron. The only way you’re getting through here is over my dead body!”

Perhaps intending to intimidate Stefan, Jumbo charged, his sword raised.

He never had the chance to lower his weapon, for in the next instant, he was transformed into two chunks of lifeless meat.

“Too slow.”

Jahar had taken a great stride from behind and unleashed an unimaginably swift strike with the large sword resting on his shoulder.

“——!”

Yuuki heard Tina, standing beside him, inhale sharply.

The fellow from the Star’s Oath Legion had chosen the wrong opponent.

“Drawing a weapon means you’ve prepared yourself to die as well!” Jahar laughed.

A few onlookers frowned and left, but the majority remained, breaking out into excited cheers. “Death” was nothing new to an adventurer. Moreover, what they’d just witnessed was a one-sided execution by one with overwhelming power, and one without the least impact on them – in other words, entertainment.

The two remaining forward guards from the Star’s Legion were struck with fright, but eventually they drew their swords as well. The courage to resist in the face of threat to life and limb was the hallmark of an adventurer, and in their case, a measure of their pride as Legionnaires.

In this instance, however, it was simply a demonstration of their foolhardiness. The difference between them and their opponents wasn’t one that could be surmounted with a little bravado.

Not a moment had passed before the two had also been slain. The first had been quartered, armor and all, by Jahar. His compatriot's arms were sliced clean off by Bertolt's scimitar. Begging for mercy, his head was severed in two with a stroke that started at the mouth and cleaved clean through his skull.

The two surviving clerics from the Star's Legion had collapsed to the ground, frozen in fear.

"Hey Stefan, let's kill these two as well. That alright with you?"

Stefan sighed, wordlessly expressing his understanding and agreement. Bertolt raised his weapon, still bloody, as his lips curled into a sadistic grin. When compared with Jahar's hot-blooded battlelust, the impression Bertolt gave was much more sinister.

"Right then. Which of you two is first?"

The clerics, frantically trying to flee for their lives, were madly flailing in an attempt to struggle up the stairs. At this distance, they wouldn't be able to activate an Orison in time. Close-combat was even less of an option. Unfortunately, even if their entire being desired escape, the fear running through them had stolen the mastery of their bodies.

Seeing their wretched state, Bertolt was filled with deep satisfaction, laughing as he raised his weapon——

"Stop! You fools!"

"...Huh?"

Suddenly, a small figure dashed forward, placing itself between the scimitar and its intended victims.

Bertolt immediately altered the arc of his swing, preparing to cut the interloper in two, and a silver flash leapt toward Tina's throat.

"——That idiot!"

With every ounce of strength in his body, Yuuki grabbed Tina by the nape of her neck, and *hauled* her back. At the same time, he kicked the flat side of the downward-swinging blade with one foot, throwing it off its intended path. Bertolt's scimitar whistled past Tina's hair as it finished its downward motion.

"You do NOT harm someone who's lost the will to fight!" Tina screamed as she struggled wildly in Yuuki's grip. "If you're an adventurer, then you compete as an adventurer competes – with results! Have you no pride?!"

"The hell do you think you're doing, you dumb kid. ...Wait, haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"I'm not a kid!"

Tina broke free of Yuuki's hold, and with chest thrust out and head straight, she met Bertolt's glare head on.

"..."

Bertolt blinked twice, thrice—— He busted out laughing.

"HAHAHAHAHAHA...I remember now. You're that little girl from that rundown shop. You had, what was it again, amnesia?"

"I don't have——"

Bertolt ignored Tina's ever more hysterical cries, and walking up to Yuuki, he grabbed him by the lapel.

"Do you remember what I said to you then, Mr. My-Store's-a-Piece-of-Shit? Did I not warn you to teach her better?"

Just as Yuuki was about to respond, he was struck in the face, and his mouth filled with the taste of iron.

"And didn't you kick my weapon just now?"

"That, well, I was just trying to protect this girl, and hit it by accident..."

“I know THAT! Like you could hit it even if you wanted to! Get this straight, though – I don’t care *why* it happened. That your filthy feet touched my weapon is not something I can overlook!”

His fist swung once more.

“Seriously, just who do you think it is that keeps this city going?! Hurry up and teach that girl already!”

His mood having passed, Bertolt let go of Yuuki. Spitting, he turned and walked away.

“M-Master——”

Tina watched Yuuki with a face on the verge of tears before turning to give Stefan a ferocious glare.

“Aren’t you the leader here?! How could you allow something so cruel?!”

She hadn’t expected an answer, but the frozen-faced Stefan replied nonetheless.

“Power is everything. ——That’s the kind of place this labyrinth is.”

Afterwards, having lost all interest, he turned and left. Jahar gave Tina an interested glance before turning to follow. The two clerics went next, with Bertolt taking up the rear. He kicked the corpses of the two he’d killed before disappearing down the path to the next level as well.

The surviving clerics from the Star’s Oath Legion had taken the opportunity the earlier commotion had provided to run away.

As the boisterous crowd dispersed, the labyrinth returned to its normal state. Aside from the blood and corpses littering the floor, that is.

“...Have you calmed down?”

As Yuuki finished his question, Tina raised her head, her face indignant.

“H-How could I possibly be calm?! Why didn’t you say anything? T-T-That arrogant, unreasonable——”

She couldn’t even finish her sentence in her extreme rage.

“Because it’s only through their efforts at retrieving Reliquia to offer the Shinki that this city even exists. When confronted by the almighty Oath Legions, no one would dare to talk back.”

“And you don’t care that they insulted you, Master?!”

“A businessman only acts after having first weighed the pros and cons. Standing up to one’s superiors won’t earn you a penny.”

“Then!”

Tina stamped her small feet over and over.

“Even if you didn’t want to do anything, you didn’t have to stop Tina! Why did you stop me?! It’s not like that Bertolt guy could have hurt me!”

It didn’t matter how strong an adventurer he was, without a celestial Dragon Fang weapon, he simply could not have harmed her. Even if he’d attacked with all his might, the most he would have accomplished would be to numb his own hands.

“Stefan had one, though – a celestial Dragon Fang weapon.”

Not that he thought Stefan was the kind of person who’d openly stab a young girl in front of a crowd of onlookers.

“Anyway, if you’d been attacked and come out completely unharmed, it’d be extremely strange, wouldn’t it? Humans fear those things they do not understand. Just like before, when you helped Bertolt; now he thinks you’re a Void Beast. Do you want that to happen again?”

“...”

“The idiot who pulled his weapon first died because of it. To go on killing and killing after that, though – that was going too far. If no one had done anything, then I probably would have thought up a way to draw their attention – to stop them. ——Point is, you saved two lives today. That should be enough.”

“...But...” Tina protested, tearful, unsure what to do with her rampaging emotions. “But humans were massacring humans, and the crowd was delighted even! Before Tina’s eyes! Before Tina, a Shinki devoted to the protection of humanity! ——Is this the true face of adventurers? How can I possibly accept that? Must I really just accept that this is the way things are?”

“...”

Yuuki had no words to offer. Tina’s question wasn’t one he had an answer for.

Some time passed before Tina sighed.

“...I’m sorry. You protected me, Master. ——Does it hurt?”

Reaching out with her tiny hand, she gently wiped the blood from his lip.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s no big deal.”

“If I had any divine energy, healing it would be a trifle. Tina really is useless right now.”

Tina’s smile was filled with sorrow.

“...To bring forth such tragedy – will there be no punishment?”

“That’s the kind of place this labyrinth is.”

The killing of another was strictly forbidden within the city. The Church’s knights would immediately arrest the criminal and begin an investigation into the matter.

Alas, the reality was that the vast majority of laws that governed the surface held no sway down below. It had become custom that anything that happened within the walls of the labyrinth would be considered an accident. Even when murder occurred, it was simply too hard for the knights of the Church to descend into the labyrinth to search for the perpetrator. Asking them to investigate the numerous deaths that took place within the labyrinth was even more impossible.

“Strength is everything. —That’s the kind of place this labyrinth is.”

Stefan’s words had been accurate. At the very least, they revealed the true nature of things.

“That said, I’m not so great at this whole kill-and-be-killed thing, so I just wander around, earning a little here and there instead.”

Yuuki laughed, mocking himself.

Though things hadn’t always been that way——

“...Master? What’s wrong?”

Hearing Tina’s voice, he was brought back to the present.

“Oh...it’s nothing. Let’s go, okay? There’s no point in sticking around here. This is one of the upper levels of the labyrinth, so the Church’s knights will be along shortly to take care of the corpses.”

The corpses of those who died within the deepest reaches of the labyrinth weren’t so fortunate – they became food for Void Beasts.

Neither human Orisons nor the miracles of the Shinki could bring back the dead. That, too, was one of the truths of this world.

“Um...in these kinds of situations, how do people pay their respects to the dead?”

“Well, I only know a pretty simple way. Let’s give it a try.”

Yuuki faced the three dead adventurers, and drawing a pentagram, offered a short prayer.

“O Lord of the Heavens, God of all creation: Please take these thy valiant servants into thy bosom. May their names be written in the Book of Life that they may be granted eternal rest——”

“...How tragic.”

Franka expressed her sympathy as she walked.

She was giving an attentive ear to Tina, whom was sharing with her the happenings of a few days before, when they had gotten caught up in the incident between the Oath Legions.

“Franka... d-do you, um, do you get into fights with other people like that too?”

“Of course not.”

Franka gave a wry smile.

“I’m sure Yuuki’s told you before, right? The only ones who feel so antagonistic toward one another are the Oath Legions. The rest of us are freelancers, and so we stick to small tasks. You have to understand, though; even if adventurers never fought one another, there’s always the risk of death. The labyrinth is a dangerous place.”

Ambushes by Void Beasts, unnoticed traps, unfortunate accidents – death took many forms.

On the other hand, however, the potential rewards were great. Take a young girl like herself, for example, who was able to earn enough to provide for herself. ——That was how Franka felt.

The two girls were walking side-by-side along the main road. Their destination was the upper part of the city, or more specifically, the large

public square before the Cathedral.

Because Tina had previously expressed the desire to watch a puppet show, the two had consulted and decided on a time to go together. There was likely just such a show ongoing at the central plaza at this time, and so the two were leisurely making their way there.

Because the road eventually led to the mountains, there was an incline to the road, though slight enough to not cause undue strain.

“My father was also a member of the Oath Legions. However, he was caught in an accident while raiding... It’s been three years since then.”

“I see...” Tina answered with a pained expression.

Although her demeanor could be a bit strange at times, Franka felt nonetheless that she was a good girl.

“Ah, sorry about that. Please don’t worry about it. It’s already become just a memory for me by now. However, at the time, I was drowning in grief and sorrow. —That was when Yuuki helped me.”

“Master did?”

“My mother passed away when I was still very young, and my siblings had already left home... It was right then, when I was left all alone, that I got caught up in something bad.”

It wasn’t anything that she had to keep secret; it’d be alright to tell her. Having come to this conclusion, Franka continued to speak.

“My father owed money.”

Franka’s father loved to take care of others, and would frequently lend his aid to his subordinates, to the extent of even shouldering their debts. He was the kind of person who would freely spend money if it was for the sake of others. It must be said that he wasn’t foolish enough to simply lend money to others without care, but given his unexpected and premature death, he hadn’t been able to repay his debts in full.

As a consequence, the inexperienced Franka had been left behind to bear the burden of debt by her lonesome, and had found herself in a pit of misery from which she could not extricate herself.

After some time, the creditor showed up at the door. When Franka saw the amount owed, she nearly fainted.

“...Although he explained that it was due to interest, I had no way of knowing if the amount he alleged was correct or not. Even if they had intentionally tried to defraud me, I had no proof. Moreover, I was very ignorant as to the ways of money. Day in and day out they’d hound me, asking for money; I was so frightened... What’s more, I simply didn’t have the money. Whatever we had in the house that I could sell, I sold.”

Their home also had a few Reliquia her father had left behind. He’d likely prepared them for Franka’s welfare, to be used in the event anything untoward happened. The creditor insisted she had to sell these items in order to make payment. Because the items technically still belonged to her, when the items were to be appraised, she went as well. The problem was, the shop owner contended that the items were worth but a pittance.

“I thought that such a thing was impossible. Father was an exceptional adventurer, there was no way he could have made such an amateur mistake. I knew nothing of Reliquia, however, and was unable to refute his words.”

Even if she sold the items in question, the bulk of the debt would still remain. All that was left to be sold would be the house... and Franka herself. This they informed her.

To “sell yourself.” This was a phrase of which Franka had only a loose conception of, but she more or less understand what it was they were asking. Her legs threatened to give way.

At that moment——

“Oh wow, that’s some pretty nice stuff.”

A voice suddenly sounded from behind her.

Turning her head, she saw a young man, standing in the doorway of the appraiser's store. He looked to be no more than two or three years her senior – a stranger.

“These are all second-grade Reliquia, aren't they? How much did this place offer you? That gauntlet especially should be worth a lot. To a warrior, it ought to be worth about 2000, no, 3000 denar.”

“Hey, who the hell are you?!” the appraiser cried out, reaching for her father's Reliquia at the same time.

He seemed to be trying to block the young man's line of sight.

“Oh, I work over at the store over there. I was just passing by and saw you guys were doing some appraising. I'm in the middle of learning to appraise myself, and thought I'd drop by and see what I could pick up, haha.”

The youth laughed lightly. Franka felt something unfathomable in his laugh.

“We're busy! Scram, you brat!”

The creditor, a large man, shouted threats at the youth as he walked over and gave him a fierce shove. With a loud crash, he tumbled and fell to the floor.

——The large man, that is.

“Oh my, that was a nasty tumble; are you alright? ——Oh no, he seems to have fainted.”

It sure didn't look like he'd tripped, but it was true that he was now unconscious.

“...You're that brat from Boris', aren't you?” the appraiser asked viciously.

“Yep. And I know you too. ——Right, the Reliquia – hurry up and tell me what your offer was. Whether my appraisal or yours is more accurate – why don't we take things to the association and find out?”

“That was Master?”

“That’s right; that was Yuuki. ——Apparently, when you receive a commission for appraisal, it’s common to take the Reliquia to many different places to seek a second opinion.”

In order to ensure that Franka did not do so, the creditor had intentionally come along, and directed Franka to this appraisal store in particular. From the very beginning, the money lender and the unscrupulous appraiser had been in collusion.

In the end, Franka paid off 60% of the debt. The creditor promised not to come after her for money again.

——This was the agreement that had been reached after the money lender and Boris had talked things over.

The money for the debt had come from Boris. She’d given her father’s Reliquia to Boris as collateral, and the money for repayment had been lent to her in exchange.

It was then that she heard from Yuuki that it was possible to make a living as an adventurer; indeed, Yuuki himself was enrolled in the adventurer training school. Franka had proceeded forthwith to transfer schools, and begun training as an adventurer. It was not long after that Yuuki first introduced Franka to Alfred.

Franka was now in the process of slowly buying back her father’s Reliquia. There were still more than a few which remained, however.

“And that brings us to now. And that is why I am forever indebted to Yuuki-san and the late Boris-san.”

“I see now...”

Tina had been a most attentive listener to Franka’s story, and now she nodded her head in understanding.

“So that’s why Franka likes Master.”

“Eh——”

Franka blushed to the tips of her ears.

“W-wha? W-w-w-why, why would you...”

“Whenever Franka talks to, or about, Master, you always look really happy. It’s a pleasing sight. Watching you makes me happy too.”

“T-Tina-chan, you, um... do you not like Yuuki-san?”

“Tina likes Master too. Although he’s not the least bit gentle, I’ve realized recently that he’s actually quite kind. Master is really an interesting person.”

Franka felt that Tina’s appraisal of Yuuki’s character was amazingly spot-on.

Even so——

(It seems that Tina-chan’s usage of ‘like’ is a little different from mine, huh?)

She’d felt for some time now that Tina’s emotions were still a bit immature.

——Although that was a relief to her, she also felt slightly guilty.

It was a fact that Franka felt rather envious of the fact that Tina was able to live together with Yuuki.

“...There wouldn’t happen to be any other openings for a live-in store attendant, would there?”

“Hmm? Do you want to be a merchant too, Franka? It seems like a pretty rough life. Master watches the books from morning ’til night, always muttering about money and taxes or something.”

“Sharing a burden is another form of happiness, you know?”

“Sorry to take your time like this,” he’d say.

“Not a problem. As long as I can be by your side, that’s enough,” she’d laugh.

——Ah, how wonderful.

Simply wonderful. Through these small exchanges, the seeds of love would be planted. Of the numerous times she’d dreamed of “Our Happily Ever After,” this definitely ranked among the top three. She had to make sure to remember this one.

Franka giggled to herself.

“——Hey, is it really that fun... being an adventurer, that is?”

“...Huh?”

Tina’s sudden question startled Franka out of her reverie.

“Oh, that, hmm. ——Well, it’s not like I’m doing it because I particularly enjoy it, so no, I don’t think it’s all that fun. Why do you ask?”

“Well, weren’t you forced to become an adventurer because of your father’s death? Have you ever had times where you’ve cursed your fate – cursed the Shinki? There should be other ways to provide for yourself, ones that don’t require setting foot in the labyrinth.”

“Oh, no, no. This is something I chose for myself. Not only is this a way for me to make money, but it’s a chance to follow in my father’s footsteps, so it’s a happy thing. There are other reasons as well.”

Franka smiled. It was true that she’d never once regretted the choice she’d made.

“Entering the labyrinth is work; in other words, a part of life. The Shinkisama bless our lives, including the labyrinth—— Something like that?”

“...So everyone’s different. I see,” Tina mumbled.

Franka felt that Tina's pensive mood had been brought about by her presence at the slaughter of the Star's Oath Legionnaires at the hands of the Sky's Oath Legion party. Had she been witness to the death of others, than she, too, would feel grief. Such things simply ought not to be.

(The Oath Legions, huh...)

Franka felt a deep gloom take hold of her.

Recently, any time she'd hear the term, she'd remember. That thing which she had no desire to recall, that thing which she had no desire to consider. As the memories came, feelings rose unbidden within her: doubt and distrust, rage and sorrow, as well as all sorts of other dark, negative emotions.

(No, no. Today's reserved for taking Tina-chan to watch the puppet show – for happy things.)

As Franka tried to convince herself of that, she also spoke aloud.

“Look, you can see the public square already.”

“Ooh... You know, the scenery here looks pretty different from the part with all the stores.”

“Oh, right – you lost your memories. The public square runs along the side of the Cathedral. On the mountain there are the temples where the Shinki-sama live. Notice how there's five of them?”

“I see, so that's... Franka, have you ever seen the Shinki before?”

“Not a chance. Not only have I never seen the Shinki-sama before, I've never even seen a Duelist before.”

Franka couldn't keep the smile from her face.

It was unlikely anyone had ever seen the Shinki before. She'd heard tell that the Duelists could occasionally be seen within the labyrinth itself, although she had never witnessed one herself. It seemed more likely than not that

they could only be found by the very highest ranked adventurers or deep within the lowest levels of the labyrinth.

That said, she'd always felt their presence by her side.

Whether it was the barriers that held the Devourer at bay, the unchanging climate, or the abundance of food – all these things bore witness of the miraculous power held by the Shinki. Rumor had it that those who offered Reliquia directly in their temples could request personalized miracles.

The lives of the Shinki and the lives of the people were inseparably intertwined.

“Ooh, it doesn't seem to have started yet!” Tina cried happily, increasing her pace.

“The afternoon show doesn't begin until after the 1 PM bell toll. There's no need to rush,” Franka called out as she gave chase.

“Hah——I'm exhausted——” Jahar complained loudly, as he exited the Cathedral. “What was with that? Document this, document that, stamp this, stamp that, process this, process that – why the hell does entering the labyrinth need so much freaking paperwork, anyway?”

“Because we are the Sky's Oath Legion,” Stefan answered.

The lowest level of the labyrinth known so far was the 62nd floor. That was what the Sky's Oath Legion records showed.

They'd just handed in the necessary paperwork to the Church of the Five Holies to make their next trip one to that area. Their stated purpose was to both map out the area as well as confirm the existence of the humanoid Void Beast Bertolt had witnessed. The elite of the Oath Legions could be considered an invaluable commodity as far as humanity's continued survival was concerned. As such, in order to avoid preventable losses, they were required to inform the Church of their plans before taking action. Because the Church was thus forewarned of their movements, if contact

was lost or a party suffered serious injuries, rescue would be able to arrive in a timely fashion.

“If we want to go, we should just be able to go. Those dudes at the Church are relying on us either way – why should we have to bow our heads and ask for help?”

“Our mission this time is of the utmost importance. Anything that will raise the probability of success – no matter how inconvenient – is worth it.”

Their claim that they intended to map the region and seek out the new Void Beast wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the true goal behind their trip either.

——No, what they sought was the single greatest prize that could be found in this world – the Snow-White Dragon Fang Gem.

Bertolt, the sole survivor of his raiding party, had reported that his party had verified its existence.

Stefan had added him to his party, and requested permission to hunt down and acquire this most precious of all Reliquia. That request had been granted. For that purpose the “Shinki who Supports the Sky” had restored Bertolt’s arm and placed him within the ranks of Stefan’s group.

The knowledge of the existence of the Dragon Fang Gem was, of course, kept under the utmost secrecy. The other Oath Legions could not be allowed to make the first move.

“I have to ask: do you really believe Bertolt? The Dragon Fang Gem is just a legend, isn’t it?”

“He is a man who prioritizes himself above all else. If he’d wanted to lie, there are much safer lies he could have told.”

Although he had been present at Bertolt’s report, the ones to make the call had been his superiors. He was simply a soldier following orders.

“I see... Still, it feels like a colossal waste of time, if you ask me.”

“You were the one who said you wanted to come because you were bored.
——Let’s go home.”

This warrior with the enormous blade had been an all but unknown adventurer just a short time before. Exhibiting stirring swordsmanship completely at contrast with his slender physique, he had won every fight during his entrance exam in rapid succession, climbing his way to the top relying solely on his strength. He was now a third-ranked warrior adventurer.

His temperament, on the other hand, left much to be desired, and he was constantly the impetus of violent conflict. It wasn’t that he easily provoked such incidents, but rather that he actively sought out such things. There was definitely a need to keep a tighter grip on his reins.

The public square at noon was incredibly lively. Exiting the Cathedral, they saw what looked to be the stage of a puppet show set up before them. Judging by the gathering crowd, it looked like things were just about to begin.

At the same time, Franka and Tina had taken their places as spectators before the stage.

The play about to be shown was “The Snow Blade King vs. Black Demon.”

“So Franka, Master tells me you really know these stories well...”

“Yeah. I’m not sure that I’d say I know them that well, but it’s true that I love them. I often come here to watch the shows.”

“So what’s the story behind this one? By the time I started watching last time, it was already half-over. I was pretty confused,” Tina commented.

Her eyes opened wide as she came to a sudden realization.

“Actually, it’ll just ruin it if I know the story beforehand. Forget I asked.”

Franka couldn’t stifle her laugh. Although amnesia was anything but a laughing matter, but watching Tina’s fresh reactions to something she must

have already seen was uniquely endearing.

“You may be right. In that case, why don’t I just give you a little background about the Snow Blade King?”

“Please.”

“The stories say he was around about a hundred years ago. He had a slender physique, and was always lightly armored. From the records we have, he was apparently quite young – just a boy, really.”

For that reason, actors portraying his character were often young, with neutral features. The depiction was rather at odds with Franka’s own tastes, however.

“You wouldn’t guess it from his appearance, but he was fantastically strong. He was so fast that you basically couldn’t follow him with your eyes. By the time anyone had realized he’d moved, Void Beasts would already have been slashed to pieces. The weapon he used——”

“Oh, I know that one. A sword, white as snow.”

“Right. Immediately after being called by the Shinki to serve as a Duelist, one of the first things he did was slay the Snowy Void Dragon, from whom he acquired a Dragon Fang Gem. The celestial Dragon Fang weapon NixSnow Blade crafted from it thus became his signature weapon.”

“Ohhh~”

“Because the Duelists do not age, up until some decades ago, it was quite common to run into them. Telling the full saga of their lives would take an incredible amount of time. Of those, the stories of the Snow Blade King are particularly plentiful, ten of which are especially well-known. The story this time is his last of those – an account of a battle between him and his greatest rival; it’s a thrilling tale! Among the Duelists that are popular these days, he’s definitely either number one or number two. Consequently, many different troupes present their different takes on the same stories. Getting to enjoy these legends from different viewpoints is really wonderful.”

“I see——”

“To be honest, though, supposedly the Snow Blade King’s ending is rather tragic. The stories say he provoked the wrath of his Shinki, and died in disgrace. That’s why there aren’t really all that many portrayals of that particular event. Watching it is an invitation for heartache. Oh, by the way, allegedly each one of the five Shinki-sama right now have a respective Duelist. Ah, I wish I could see them just once; who knows if I’ll ever get a chance in this life? Their strength is on an entirely different level from that of rank one adventurers. No one knows where they come from or where they eventually go – they’re truly heroes of great mystery. It’s that mystique they have about them that has everyone so fascinated, and so we do our best to pass on their legends to future generations—— Hmm, is everything okay?”

Franka realized Tina had been watching her with a most peculiar expression on her face.

“You... have no need to be so modest. I think you know a great deal.”

“I-Is that so? You know, I——”

The solemn tolling of the cathedral bell cut Franka short.

“Oh, it’s starting.”

The sound had yet to finish before one of the male puppeteers walked out and began narrating the preamble.

At that precise moment——

The lightning flash of a silvery blade thundered down.

——Straight toward Tina’s head.

The tolling of the Cathedral bell proclaimed the time an hour after midday.

Stefan idly glanced at his surroundings, bored. ——Suddenly he noticed – Jahar was gone.

“...Just where did that man go?”

This wasn't the labyrinth – it was the city. He surely wouldn't create a disturbance here? ——Just as that thought ran through Stefan's mind, he was struck by a deep-seated feeling of regret at his own naivety.

He raced toward the screaming where he found Jahar charging into a crowd of people with his favored weapon drawn.

The sound of an explosive gust rang out, and a wave of dust flew into the air.

As the air cleared, he saw Jahar, sword raised, standing there. Facing him was a small, young girl glaring murderously back at him.

“Haha, you won't turn your back for even a second eh, little lady. You've got grit, I'll give you that. I believe your name is Tina?”

“...What do you think you're doing?!”

“Nothing, nothing. Just thought I'd say hello. I like people with a little backbone. When you called out that fool Bertolt earlier, I decided you were worth keeping an eye on.”

His slippery tone evoked an expression of deep loathing from the girl.

Stefan recalled her now – the girl from that trash shop.

“...Don't cause trouble in the city, Jahar. Let's go.”

Fine~ Jahar replied, obediently trailing after him.

“Wait——”

“Stop right there!”

Tina's words were drowned out by another voice, calling for Stefan to stop.

——A familiar voice. From the start, Stefan had been intentionally ignoring this person's existence, but now he had been spoken to directly.

The owner of the voice walked slowly forward before stopping directly in front of Stefan, barring his way.

“Your subordinate over there tried to hurt one of my friends, and you’re going to leave without so much as an apology?”

“No harm, no foul,” Jahar chimed in from beside Stefan.

Franka ignored him, continuing to stare Stefan down.

“No one was hurt, so what would there be to apologize over? Move.”

“I refuse!”

Her tone was forceful, completely at odds with her usual self.

“——While I’m at it, let me ask something else. Bertolt joining your party – was that your idea?”

“...”

“Why?” taking Stefan’s silence for confirmation, Franka questioned.

This time she received an answer.

“Because I need to know.”

“——!”

Franka held back her tears with all her might. With eyes brimming with rage and sorrow, she continued to stare at Stefan.

“...”

“...I’ve always felt that it couldn’t be helped that we’ve grown apart. The worlds we live in couldn’t be further apart, after all. ——This entire time,

I've been telling myself: look forward, move on, let go of your hate. But this – this I can't understand!"

"..."

"Why would you take him as a companion? How could you allow him to become a member of your party – someone whom you would trust with your life?"

Franka continued to speak, *forcing* the words out.

"Don't tell me the two of you plotted together to kill Father? ——Answer me, Nii-san!"

"A formal accusation was never raised, and so I have no opinion on the matter."

"The only one with the authority to charge him was the party leader – was Father! How can the dead charge someone with a crime?! Nii-san—— Why didn't you do anything, Nii-san? My father was your teacher! Weren't the two of you close? Do you really feel nothing?"

In response to the torrent of accusations, Stefan had but one reply.

"...It doesn't matter what the precise cause of death may have been. Those who lose their lives within the labyrinth have only one thing to blame – their own weakness. That's all there is to it."

Stefan's cold voice was as emotionless as ever. Turning, he left the speechless Franka behind.

"Ah, they're here. Yuuki-san, over here."

Franka stood at the labyrinth entrance, energetically waving Yuuki over.

As Yuuki was about to head home, having finished his work for the training school for the day, one of the instructors had handed him a message from Alfred. Accompanying him was Tina, who had been dying of boredom back at the store.

“Sorry for making the two of you run over here on short notice,” Alfred apologized.

“This is a kind of work, too. As long as I get something in trade, there’s nothing to complain about. ——On that note, what can I do for you? It’s rare for you to call for me like this, Uncle.”

“I found something in the labyrinth I’d like to have you take a look at.”

“Oh. Couldn’t you have just brought it to the store then...?”

“It’s because I can’t do that that I called you over. This isn’t something that can be moved.”

“Can’t be moved? What is it?”

“It’d be simpler for you to see it yourself. Why don’t we head there now? I’ll pay you for this. Our destination is on the third floor... ——Er, where again?”

“Near the stairwell,” Franka added, checking a map.

“So that’s where we’ll have to ask you to go, Yuuki-san, Tina. Oh, don’t worry though; we’ll protect you.”

“Sorry about yesterday... Why don’t we go back some other time?” Franka said to Tina as they walked.

“Don’t worry about it. You weren’t at fault,” Tina said angrily.

As a result of the incident, the puppet show had ended up being canceled.

When Jahar of the Sky’s Oath Legion had brandished his sword at Tina, a large commotion had been caused. The resulting chaos enveloped the entirety of the public square, and the puppet show troupe had called off their daytime showing.

When Tina had returned, steaming mad, Yuuki had asked about the situation. The entire thing seemed to be the fault of the other party, though

he had to admit he wasn't sure if the same thing would have happened had he been there.

Before the tense atmosphere between Franka and Stefan had abated, Franka had informed Tina that she wasn't feeling well, and was heading back first — was Tina's report.

"Are you feeling better now, Franka?"

"Ah yes, I'm fine. Sorry for making you worry. I'm perfectly fine, see?"

Franka twirled on the spot as if dancing.

"Even if this is still one of the early levels, we can't afford to be careless. Remember, we're also responsible for protecting these two," Alfred warned.

Franka seemed a bit off. She was *too* happy, which felt strongly of pretense.

——Was it just his imagination?

After traveling just a short while, they arrived at the third floor without incident.

"Now then – what was it you wanted me to see?"

"This, this. The stone monument – I think it's a stele? – here."

Alfred was pointing at a large, slender piece of stone resting near the wall. It was about as tall as a full-grown adult. Completely covered with moss, it looked to have lain there for decades or perhaps even centuries.

Although its appearance almost perfectly matched that of a stele, it lacked the engravings one expected to see.

"I was the one who noticed it," Franka offered, raising her hand. "Try giving it a touch."

Yuuki reached out as she'd suggested, and his eyes widened in shock as he made contact.

It hadn't felt like the cold stone he'd expected, but rather warm to the touch. It had even seemed to throb a little.

"...What the heck?"

"It's weird, isn't it? Are there any legends about what it might be? I figured you'd know."

"Hmm, I can't think of any at the moment... Let me see what else I can glean."

Alfred gave him the go ahead, and moved off to the side.

"It's really exciting, isn't it? Discovering something new like this."

"If it really is a new discovery, then there might even be something in it for you."

When new mechanisms or apparatuses were discovered, the Church would give the discoverer a small reward. Information which should be shared was thus shared, which in turn furthered the adventurer knowledge base.

The one requirement was that for a discovery to be reported to the Church, one first had to know what it was that had been discovered.

Yuuki called Tina over, and knelt down on one knee before the monument.

Yuuki had explained that, unsure of the object's function, it was best to stay back. Alfred and Franka had thus backed away some distance.

"...Do you feel any divine energy from it?" Yuuki whispered directly into Tina's ear.

Tina nodded her assent.

"Not just that, it's very strong, too. However——"

Tina shook her head in puzzlement.

“The last time I was here, I didn’t feel anything like this.”

“Last time?”

“The last time Master brought me here. The day those awful people from the Oath Legions fought each other.”

Yuuki nodded in understanding. A few days before they’d come to gather some herbs. Tina had gotten wrapped up in Stefan’s fight, and he’d gotten punched by Bertolt.

“Honestly, just thinking about their merciless brutality makes me so mad _____”

“Oi oi, we’re not here to talk about that again. We’re here for the monument, remember?”

“Oh, right. ——Do you not remember, Master? Tina rested here last time.”

Now that she mentioned it... Completely exhausted, she’d rested here for a short while.

“Tina rested right around here.”

Her delicate finger pointed straight at the stone piece.

“I would definitely have noticed anything this close with divine energy.”

“Could it have slipped your notice because of how tired you were?”

“Master, if someone were to strike a bell a meter away from your ears, is there any way you wouldn’t hear it? Even now I can feel divine energy surging up from it. It’s simply impossible for me to have missed it.”

“If that’s the case, then it means that this happened recently – since we left. It has to have started operating since then.”

They were pretty close to the stairway. This was a place that adventurers passed by all the time. Even if it were just human adventurers who lacked Tina's sensitivity for divine energy, if it had always been like this, it would have long since been found.

“Seriously, though, just what *is* this thing? Everything that stores divine energy has a specific function... Any ideas, Tina?”

“Hmm... You know, it feels awfully familiar...”

The Shinki pondered deeply.

“The flow of divine energy seems to be directed. It feels like it bubbles up from deep below before finally reaching the stone...”

“Reaching——”

The phrase set off a lightbulb in Yuuki's mind.

“Tina.”

“W-what is it, Master?”

“I need you to think long and hard, okay? The last time we came here, did you touch that piece of stone?”

“Hmm? Okay...”

Tina mumbled a reply as she circled around the side of the monument and knelt.

“Yeah. Last time Tina sat right here, and then Master said it was time to go, so I got up in a hurry—— Oh.”

Her hand had unintentionally grasped the stone monument for support.

“As I thought. You're the one that caused this. Do you remember? The room where you were born probably had something just like this.”

“Eh? ——Ah, you’re right!” Tina clapped.

“Near the wall where Tina was born. I see, so that’s why it felt so familiar.”

“It should be some kind of teleport apparatus. Half of a pair. My guess is it was meant to allow you to reach Solitus directly after being born. ——Do you think you could search out the source of the divine energy?”

“Sure! Leave it to me!”

Tina nodded with enormous enthusiasm, and placed her hands atop the stone monument.

“It flows up from down below. As it hits this point, it disperses before slowly drifting back down. I can’t get a good feel for a specific origin for it down below – it’s very indistinct. ——Oh, I think I get it now. This is the exit. Activation requires contact by qualified individuals. The number of people to be teleported and the range can both be set.”

“If both sides were running, you’d be able to teleport straight to the third floor from deep within the labyrinth. From what you said about the flow of divine energy, it’s probably a one-way trip. That’s why it can’t do anything right now.”

“So Tina’d have to touch the other one to make them work?”

“More or less. The one in the room where you were born should be the main one; this one would likely start on its own if you were to touch that one. You’d have been able to head to Solitus then.”

“...So Tina took the loooong way round?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Summoning her Duelist after birth, she’d use the teleporter to reach the city. That was the path intended for her. Instead, however, she’d rescued Bertolt and been rescued by Yuuki in turn. Definitely the long way round. It wasn’t her fault, though.

“Instead I had to wander the labyrinth, lost. What a waste... Oh well. A Shinki doesn’t dwell on the past.”

“That’s not a Shinki thing but a you thing.”

“Go ahead and praise me more.”

Just as he was about to retort that there was nothing to praise, he suddenly noticed something about the monument.

“...What’s this?”

Far down the lateral face of the monument, the stone was marred. It was almost as if someone had carved into it with a dagger or something. The mark was new.

Looking closely... was that not the emblem of the “Shinki who Supports the Sky?”

“So, what did you guys find?” Alfred called out from a fair distance away.

“Oh, we’re done. You guys can come on over.”

After the two walked over, Yuuki filled them in on the situation: that it was part of a teleporter, and that this was just but one half of the equation – useless on its own.

“So this is part of a pair with another far below, huh. There’s nothing we can do then.”

“That’s pretty bad luck,” Franka said with a wry smile.

“I think the Church will want to look into it as is. I’m pretty sure they’ll still reward you for this discovery. ——On a different note, though, Uncle – were you the one who made this mark?”

Yuuki pointed at the engraving on the monument with his finger for the others to see. Alfred frowned.

“I would never do anything like that, nor would I let anyone else.”

When investigating an unknown object, it was best not to touch it if at all possible. Any damage to the item might lower its value, and even if that didn't occur, there was also the possibility of activating some unknown function through carelessness.

“When we first found it, that definitely wasn't there. We found an adventurer making his way back to the city and had him carry the message to you for us. After that, we inspected it a bit more before heading back to the surface to meet you... Wait, don't tell me——”

Alfred seemed to have realized something as he suddenly frowned. From not far off, the sound of footsteps carried over, followed by a toneless voice.

“Please leave. This area is under our jurisdiction.”

Stefan looked at them with an emotionless gaze. Aside from Bertolt and his other party members, he was also accompanied by a handful of other adventurers as well.

“...”

All expression vanished from Franka's face.

“We found this first, you know?” Alfred replied calmly. “Those who make the first discovery have claim on the discovery.”

“Except, unfortunately for you, we were here first, Alfred-san,” Bertolt responded, with a nauseating grin.

Yuuki clicked his tongue. He knew what was going on.

“——Ah. A Rat, no?” Alfred said softly, looking at the bedraggled adventurers standing behind Stefan. They shrunk from his gaze.

“Rat” referred to the low-ranking adventurers who specialized in selling info on their peers, or who'd sneak in from the side to steal the fruits of

others' labor. It was possible to hire their services: either to spy on other adventurers or to sabotage their efforts.

They'd been following Alfred's party and had discovered the stone monument's existence from their actions. When Franka and Alfred had left the scene, they'd carved the mark into the stone monument and scampered off to report to their masters.

"How terribly unfortunate indeed. The mark carved into the stone there is all the proof we need, however. Now, why don't you obediently take your leave?"

"T-this is ridiculous!" Tina shouted, charging to the forefront.

Yuuki had been unable to restrain her in time. Growing ever more enraged, she continued to yell.

"What gives you the right——"

"Haha, you sure are cute when you're mad as hell, little lady," Jahar laughed.

Tina swallowed the words she'd been about to speak and shrank back a step. She didn't seem to know how to deal with the man.

Yuuki stood in front of her protectively and sighed.

"Would you not scare her like that? We're just here for a consult; we're nobodies."

"I heard you. This is a teleportation device of some kind. Thanks for saving us the trouble," Bertolt called out mockingly.

It hadn't been his intention to investigate on behalf of that guy, but that was how things had turned out.

"Don't think I'll let you fiddle with this any longer. Shut your traps and get lost."

“Hey, that’d mean I’d have worked for nothing. At the very least——”

Suddenly, blood spurted out from Yuuki’s left ear.

“Master!”

“Yuuki-san!”

The two voices cried out in unison. Bertolt’s scimitar was drawn, he having been the one who’d struck Yuuki.

“Did I not tell you to shut your mouth? A dog that can’t listen to its master deserves to be taught a lesson!”

His actions made no sense. Yuuki sighed again, giving up on trying.

“I guess when you see a dog even weaker than yourself, you have to make a real show of it eh, you washed-up pup.”

“The hell did you say?! Do you want to die, Jahar?”

“Stop.”

Stefan impassively reined the two in before turning to face Alfred.

“Regardless of what other circumstances may be at play, locking down the area where a new discovery is made comes first; investigating the item can occur after that requirement is met. That is something you freelancing adventurers can’t handle. This is a job for those with strength – for the Oath Legions. ——You people need to leave.”

It was maddening to hear, but it was nonetheless the truth.

Despite the fact that Alfred and the others were the discoverers here, but if they were left in charge of the investigation, progress would be slow. There wasn’t much they could do but leave it to the Church and the Oath Legions.

The real heart of the matter was – were they willing to forego the honor and prize given for first discovery?

“...In any case, it’s true that it’s my fault for never expecting that someone would try to rob us of something like this,” Alfred sighed.

Left with no other choice, he shrugged.

“Forget it. There’s no point in trying to fight over this.”

“My thanks,” Stefan replied disinterestedly.

This was an unavoidable result. Even if they’d been willing to challenge the Oath Legion party in battle, there wasn’t anything they could have gained from it. Yuuki grabbed the unhappy Tina and, following the others, turned to leave.

At that moment——

“Power, right?” a voice called out.

“It’s your favorite word, isn’t it? Power is the most important thing, right, Ste~phen-san?”

It was Franka who’d spoken.

Yuuki forgot to breathe. Of their party, she ought to be the one who despised conflict the most, and yet she now faced the others with open hostility.

Stefan frowned. It was almost imperceptible, but his expression changed.

“——Here, power is everything. I have certainly said so before, yes.”

“Then if I defeat you, are you willing to abandon those idiotic words?”

“Even if I lost, all it would demonstrate is that I was too weak. It would not mean that the pursuit of strength was incorrect. ——Either way, this is a moot point – you can’t win.”

“How can you say something’s impossible without trying it first...”

Stefan spoke over her with his next words.

“Tomorrow morning, my party will raid the sixtieth floor. Where I stand is a place you can’t even dream of challenging. Know your limits.”

“...”

Franka continued to glare at him ferociously, but she couldn’t refute his words.

“As long as you continue to be an adventurer, you will forever remain beneath me. The only way you will ever escape that will be by ceasing to be an adventurer.”

“...This is the worst.”

“Well, if I have to be honest, then yes, I agree. Here, eat.”

They were seated in the corner of a restaurant. On the table before them was a huge dish.

“——Whoa, these skewers are amazing, Master! Way better than what we eat at home!”

Tina, who had never been one for restraint, was tucking in like she hadn’t seen food in days. Just a moment ago, she’d been infuriated by the actions of Stefan’s party and grumbling endlessly. Now she was in rapture.

This Shinki sure doesn’t give a damn about manners... Yuuki grumbled inwardly. Perhaps he needed to give her some lessons on proper etiquette.

“Oh, don’t worry about money, you guys. It’s my treat.”

“What I’m worrying about is what comes after that. Making sure things add up is a merchant’s way.”

“I wasted your time. Consider this my apology.”

“Well, I appreciate it, but if that was truly your intention, you wouldn’t have sent Franka away.”

As Yuuki and Tina had headed back to the shop, having been summoned for nothing, Alfred had dropped by and invited them along for dinner. There was simply no way this was just an apology meal.

Alfred stopped to consider for a moment. Pausing, he asked, “Yuuki, what do you think of revenge?”

Yuuki frowned and looked at Alfred’s face, looking for a hint in his expression. His face was as relaxed and languid as always, not the least bit different from normal.

“Why’re you asking that all of a sudden, Uncle? Don’t tell me you’re thinking of killing someone.”

“Exactly. Let’s say, for example, that a family member of mine had been killed and I was thinking of revenge. Would you stop me?”

“No. As long as you didn’t involve anyone else in your actions, then go ahead and do it and get caught. The only regret I’d feel would be over losing another valued customer.”

Alfred gave a wry smile.

“That answer sure suits you, but unfortunately, I’m being serious here. —— Let me ask directly. I want to know – Yuuki, if someone close to you was seeking revenge, what would you do?”

“...If their hostility runs so deep that killing is on their mind, then that’s their own choice. The only one who can call an end to those kinds of thoughts is the person in question. At the very least, I wouldn’t tell them to stop.”

Hah... Alfred scratched his head with a groan. He continued, “Hey, don’t you think Franka’s pretty cute? Her personality’s great and she cooks pretty well. The guy who lands her is definitely a lucky one.”

“The heck are you talking about now? I’m lost.”

“Even if her thoughts are her own, but if someone important to her were to say something, I’m sure she could change.”

“...So she’s the one who wants revenge?”

“I don’t know if she’s thought things through quite that far yet.”

Alfred took a deep gulp from his cup of juice. Yuuki’d heard before that he wouldn’t touch alcohol.

“You know her father died in the labyrinth, right? Well, the truth is, people say he was murdered.”

The public security arm of the Church of the Five Holies wouldn’t intervene in affairs taking place within the labyrinth. Among those incidents where adventurers had lost their lives inside, there were undoubtedly at least a few “accidents” or “Void Beast attacks” that were, in truth, murders.

“And the culprit?”

“Unclear. There hasn’t been any real evidence found. At the time, however, both Stefan and Bertolt were in that party.”

Yuuki thought of the stone-faced spear wielder and the brutal scimitar user. It was true that they weren’t exactly the kind of person that wouldn’t harm a fly.

“Especially Bertolt. That guy had a horrible reputation at the time. Although his swordsmanship wasn’t anything to laugh at, but he was known for stealing Reliquia, hindering his fellow adventurers, and really just being willing to dirty his hands for the least advantage. I’m pretty sure the Rats from today work for him. His realm of influence both within the labyrinth and the city is large. That said, I don’t think we’re noteworthy enough to be spied on; today was just an unlucky coincidence.”

“You sure seem clear on the matter.”

“Yeah, I don’t really care to hide it, so let me be straight with you – I used to be a member of the Sky’s Oath Legion.”

As he spoke those words, Alfred looked as if he'd intended to give a mocking smile... but he didn't smile.

“There were too many things I wasn't willing to do, so I left. During the time I was there, Franka's father often watched out for me. The reason I decided to become a mentor was because of him.”

“When Franka heard of her father's death, wouldn't she have been told it was just an accident? Where'd she get the idea that he was murdered?”

“Well, there are ways. The thing I'm not sure about is whether she only found out just recently or if this is something she's known for a long time now. The problem is, recently, she's been acting really strange. She even outright provoked Stefan on her own today. ——As far as I know, they don't interact much these days.”

“——By which you mean that, once upon a time, they did?”

“They're siblings, aren't they?” Tina suddenly piped up, her cheeks filled with chicken skewer. “Yesterday, Franka called him ‘Nii-san,’ though with a really scary look on her face.”

“Yes. Franka is Stefan's half-sister by her mother. I believe he's two years her elder. Their mother was originally a mistress of the Klose household, but she eventually married Franka's father. She passed away a long time ago from illness.”

“Ohh...”

“Although Stefan was raised in the Klose household, while his mother still lived, he'd often visit, and would thus run into Franka. At the time, their relationship was pretty good, it seems.”

“So how come she spoke to him like that then?”

“That's why I said she's been strange of late. When he came into your store the other day, she didn't react that way. They run into each other every now and then at the training school, but I've never heard of any conflicts

between them. They certainly don't interact enough to warrant this level of hostility. ——I've always thought their relationship was a little unstable, but today... she was so openly accusatory..."

Indeed, her words today were more condemnation than accusation.

"Hmm..."

Yuuki thought for a moment.

"Perhaps she found some sort of conclusive evidence that Stefan was involved in her father's murder?"

"He's very suspicious, to be honest. Not only was he present at the scene of the crime, but the previous owner of the AmnisBlue Water Pike was Franka's father."

The spear in question was the celestial Dragon Fang weapon wielded by Stefan.

"That weapon is the property of the Sky's Oath Legion as a whole. Every one of its masters has been chosen from the Legion's ranks by the Shinki."

"And when its current master dies, it passes on to the next candidate. In other words, he was the next in line at the time."

"Right. Simply put, there was motive. That said, there hasn't been any conclusive evidence. ——However, judging by Franka's actions, it's not just at the level of 'suspicion' anymore so much as conviction; she must have found something. After all, that girl's always felt rather insecure, and not combative in the least."

Just what on earth had she learned of late? In any case, was it really that easy to learn something new about an incident which had taken place years ago? Was there some method for investigating?

——Yuuki suddenly realized. There was.

“...Let’s not focus on that for the moment. What do you want from me? Are you asking me to tell her ‘Don’t worry about your father’s death or his murderer – just forget about it.’?”

“Are you not willing to be her chain?”

“Chain?”

“This is simply a matter of pros and cons – your specialty. When it comes to revenge, it doesn’t matter whether you kill or are killed; once you set foot in that blood-soaked world, there’s no turning back. A loss is a loss. If we can somehow tether her to this side, then that’d be best. ——So, how about it? I know you’ve deliberately maintained your distance, but why not try and get a little closer to her? She really likes you, you know. I’m sure you’ve noticed?”

“...”

He said it. Yuuki knew he’d long since seen through him, though.

At first he thought he’d try to muddle the issue, but reconsidering, he decided it was best he didn’t.

“I’m going to have to say no.”

“Why?”

“She’s indeed a valued customer of mine, and it’s not like I hate her. That said, there’s no reason for me to get involved. Simply put, there’s nothing in it for me.”

“——Master!”

Alfred hadn’t managed to say a word in reply before he was interrupted by Tina’s yell.

“You’re too much! That way of speaking... is too cold...”

“How do I put this? The thoughts residing in people’s hearts and the way of life they’ve chosen for themselves are much more complex than you imagine, Tina. Franka’s desire for revenge because of her father’s murder... If you’re asking me to bear the responsibility for wiping away that hatred then I don’t have the confidence that I can do any such thing. Nor do I have any reason to do so.”

“B-but——”

“Forget it, Tina-chan. I was the one asking for too much,” Alfred said with a bitter laugh. “Asking someone to accept someone else’s feelings isn’t something you force, and yet I asked anyway. ——I’ve discussed this with her already, but she stubbornly insists that ‘it’s nothing.’ I didn’t know what else to do. She seems determined.”

“...”

“In any event, promise me you’ll at least talk to her?”

From beginning to end, Alfred had been in complete control of the conversation. Tina, too, was now giving him the evil eye.

Yuuki could only sigh.

Chapter 4: The Snow-white Dragon's Fang Gem



四章

白雪の竜牙石

Early, before the rising of the sun, a lone girl walked the road to the labyrinth.

Stefan had said his party'd set out in the morning. If she left now, she could beat them there.

Franka hoped to negotiate with her brother, to have them take her with them.

She wanted to demonstrate her abilities, to be acknowledged by them.

Stefan and Bertolt were both adventurers who respected only power. Thus, as far as they were concerned, she had no value.

"Where I stand is a place you can't even dream of challenging," her brother had said.

So she'd show him. Afterward, when she stood on equal footing with him as his peer, they'd be able to have a true dialogue.

——Franka suddenly noticed several figures farther down the road, blocking her path forward.

She was instinctively wary until one of the figures called out to her with a voice familiar to her ears.

"See? Here she comes. What did I tell you?"

It was Alfred, with Yuuki and Tina standing by his side.

"Wha? You guys...? Why?"

"Your master saw right through you," Yuuki said with a shrug.

"You weren't thinking of doing anything rash, were you, Franka?" Tina said, with a look of unease and concern.

"Um, well...I..."

Caught off-guard by the unexpected turn of events, Franka's gaze strayed.

"...I'm sorry."

"So what was the plan? Beg Stefan to take you with him? Or perhaps you were planning on tailing him? That's what Uncle guessed."

"Well, both, I guess. If asking him failed, then I'd follow——"

"Let me be the one to tell you: you can't go. You simply don't have what it takes yet," Alfred said with a heavy sigh. "You want an open conversation with him about your father, right? There will be many more opportunities after today. If he won't talk to you unless you're of equal standing, then it can wait until you're stronger. I can tell you right now that you have that potential."

"I appreciate your words Master... but I've waited long enough."

Franka smiled sadly.

"Father was the most important person to me. He was so strong and kind; we shared so many precious memories. Although as an adventurer, he was in the labyrinth more than he was home, but every time he came home, the first thing he'd do would be to wrap his arms around me in a hug. He made me so, so happy. That's why——"

How her expression had twisted as she spoke, she herself was more aware than anyone.

"I can't forgive those who stole that happiness from me, nor any who would dirty those memories. I know what you're saying but, still, somehow, somehow, I have to——"

"You asked a Shinki, didn't you?" Yuuki murmured.

Franka lifted her head and looked at him.

"Yesterday, you were so combative... The way you interrogated him, it was almost like you knew for sure, like you had some kind of proof. You're the

kind of person who suffers quietly on her own – who won't let anyone know what bothers you. Am I wrong?"

——He wasn't wrong.

"For you to have gone after him so aggressively means that you've already decided. Moreover, it's happened recently."

"..."

"Although offering Reliquia to the Shinki is the domain of the Oath Legions, it's not like anyone else is forbidden from doing so. Anyone can make an offering, and anyone can be rewarded for doing so, whether that reward be money or a miracle. ——You asked the Shinki to reveal the criminal's identity, didn't you?"

"...More accurately, what I asked was to 'see my father's last moments.' It was the day before; I went after parting with Tina-chan once the show was canceled."

Franka's father had also been Stefan's mentor in spear combat.

Even if she and her brother were estranged, it had been the earnest hope of her heart that he would have approached her on his own, and openly and candidly shared the details of her father's death.

It had been then – when Stefan had affirmed that he saw Bertolt as a companion of his, and made light of her father's death – that that hope had died.

Afterward, she'd visited the Sanctuary of the "Shinki who Supports the Sky" and, offering up one of her father's Reliquia, had been bestowed with a miracle in turn.

Her actions had been more than hasty, to be sure, but – what had been seen could not be unseen. Now that she knew, she could not *not* act.

"What did you see?"

“...Something I had no desire to ever see, though it wasn’t all that unexpected.”

“It doesn’t matter what you do now; it’s too late to change what you saw. There’s nothing whatsoever to be gained by taking these risks now.”

“——At the very least, my conscience will be clear. Yuuki-san, can you possibly understand the feelings of my father as he was murdered?”

“...”

“I’m sorry. Please move.”

Sighing in resignation, Yuuki gave in to her request.

Franka sensed that if she left now, it would be the end of their friendship.

He would not approach her again. Of this, she felt certain.

Sighing, she was struck with a deep feeling of loneliness. Nevertheless, she pressed on.

“I did what I could. Things turned out as I knew they would, though,” Yuuki said softly.

It had been hopeless from the start. It was meaningless to try to convince someone of the folly of their ways when they had chosen to act despite knowing that very thing.

With a quick “I’m sorry for the trouble,” Alfred left to follow her. He intended to follow her and try and convince her once more.

“Alright Tina, let’s go——”

“You big duuuuuuuuummy!”

Accompanying the yell was a vicious kick to his calf.

“Ow!”

“And here I thought you had some other plan in mind. The hell do you mean ‘things turned out as I knew they would’! Have you no heart at all, Master?! Just how cold-blooded can you be?!”

“Well, they did, didn’t they? I tried. You saw it yourself – she didn’t want to stop. What else could I have done?”

“...Forget it. You’re not the person I thought you were.”

Tina gave him a piercing glare and then turned.

——Toward the labyrinth.

“And where do you think you’re going?”

“To stop Franka, of course. And if I can’t stop her, then to help her.”

“Are you planning to tell her you’re a Shinki?”

“If it comes to that. I’ll just ask her for a Divine Pearl, and once I work a miracle, then it should all be clear. At the very least, I can still be a shield; it’s not like those Void Beasts can hurt me.”

“You’re violating the terms of our agreement. You promised me you wouldn’t reveal your identity, remember?”

“Agreement?”

Tina stopped and looked back.

“Who gives a damn about your agreement?! ——You need to understand something, Master. Tina is a Shinki, and it’s only for that purpose that she’s even here. The very reason I exist is to protect the city and its people. If I can’t even save someone in front of me who needs my help, then how could I possibly call myself a Shinki? If food and housing have to come at the cost of denying my very self, then forget it!”

Having screamed that out in a single breath, she panted for air.

“That’s gonna be a problem for me.”

“...Don’t worry – I won’t cause any trouble for you.”

Tina’s breathing returned to normal, and she continued.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me. Now then——”

“That’s not what I meant. Business is founded on the principle of investment – you spend money in hopes of earning more money. I have yet to receive anything from you. Are the Shinki really the kind of people who would forgo repayment of a debt?”

“T-Then what do you want? I have no money...”

“And that’s why canceling our agreement right now is unacceptable. So let’s meet halfway, alright? It’s not like there’s any other choice.”

“Eh? Eh?”

Tina blinked vacantly, puzzled.

“You mean... you’ll help?”

“Let’s just say it’s a compromise to further the value of my investment. In any event, I think I know how to help Franka.”

“What’s that – so you did have a plan!”

She brightened.

“That’s Master for you! Sorry for calling you cold-blooded.”

You’re right on that point, Yuuki thought to himself. I’m not cold-blooded... just a coward.

Without finding some sort of excuse with which to rationalize his actions, he couldn't bring himself to involve himself in others' affairs.

“So? So? What's the plan? Hurry up and tell me!”

Facing Tina, whom was leaning in eagerly, he gave a wry smile and answered.

“Franka's goal is to have Stefan acknowledge her strength, but that guy's a rank one adventurer – Franka's only a fourth-rank. Even if we tried to help, Uncle Alfred's only a third-rank, and I'm a ninth. Trying to beat that group to the punch is impossible. ——So we'll rely on the privilege of the weak – trickery.”

“And that would involve... what exactly?”

“We're going to deliver Franka one heck of a meritorious deed – courtesy of your powers, O Great Shinki-sama.”

Tina could only stare in response.

Stefan double-checked that everyone was ready before nodding.

“Let's move.”

The party had arrived at the labyrinth. The forward guard consisted of Stefan, Bertolt, and Jahar – these three. The two clerics taking up the rear brought the total to five.

Their raid today had several goals.

- The 62nd floor was far as anyone had explored so far. They aimed to exceed that.
- Confirm the existence of Bertolt's humanoid Void Beast, and defeat it, if possible.

- Most importantly: to find and retrieve the Snow-white Dragon Fang Gem.
- And last, but not least, a newly tacked on goal: to find the counterpart to the stone discovered the day before.

The investigations by the Sky's Oath Legion had determined that the stone was more than likely a teleportation device. It seemed to be part of a set of connected stones that enabled travel between them.

If the teleportation device had the ability to warp between floors, it would be a momentous discovery. If adventurers could instantly move between the upper and lower floors, then the efficiency with which raids were performed would increase dramatically. Accordingly, further investigation was an absolute necessity.

Abruptly, Stefan flashed a sign to his party members, and they all pulled to a stop.

At the stairway leading from the first floor to the second, several familiar figures stood, barring their way.

“Morning there, Stefan.”

“...What do you think you're doing, Alfred? Are you planning on getting in our way?”

From the looks of things, they'd been waiting for him. Although the labyrinth had many entrances, there was only one stairway connecting the first and second floors – all adventurers had to pass through here.

“Of course not. I'm not crazy enough to interfere with the Oath Legions' raiding. ——This girl has something she wants to say. Will you hear her out?”

“This some kind of joke?! Get the hell out of——”

Stefan raised his right hand, silencing Bertolt.

Franka stepped forward.

“Please, take me with you.”

“Reason being?”

“I... want to demonstrate that I have the ability to stand on equal footing with you.”

“That’s not even worth responding to,” Stefan answered coldly.

Franka inhaled sharply.

“The purpose of the Oath Legions is to serve the Shinki, as well as to explore the labyrinth – to search for a way out of this doomed world. That is our *raison d’être*. You are a freelancing adventurer – just how self-serving is your need to prove yourself?”

“——! T-That’s why, let me come——”

“Okay, okay. Let me interrupt for a bit.”

An easygoing voice cut in.

“——A breakdown in the negotiations, right?”

Two figures walked over, pushing Bertolt aside.

It was the owner of the store which peddled the garbage of the labyrinth and the young girl that was his assistant.

“Y-Yuuki-san? And Tina-chan...”

“What do you want?” Stefan asked.

Yuuki chuckled.

“Well, yesterday you claimed all the credit for our hard work. That doesn’t sit too well with me, so I thought I’d come watch—— Watch Franka find

that teleporter's counterpart before you, that is."

Stefan frowned. What madness was this man rambling off now?

"You Oath Legions have checked it out already, right? That teleporter on the third floor has a pair somewhere else. Finding it would be the discovery of a lifetime – an act worthy of distinction."

"..."

"Now, my dear Lord Stefan, didn't you just say that the Oath Legions' power is for the sake of serving the Shinki – for the purpose of exploring this labyrinth? In that case, if you were to play second fiddle to such an important discovery as this... wouldn't that imply that your 'power' was inferior to hers?"

"Such an occurrence is simply impossible. She lacks the strength to even reach the deeper floors; the addition of an inconsequential ninth-rank adventurer doesn't change a thing."

"Oh my, you know my rank?"

"...As the sole failure of a student within the advanced class, you are, of course, well-known."

"Then there's nothing for you to fear. Why not join us in this little wager?"

"There's nothing to wager on. I don't have the authority to restrict the movements of another adventurer, nor do I have the authority to deny the fruits of their labors. If you somehow manage to do something of note before me, then I'll acknowledge it."

"That's all I ask. Right then, sorry for the delay."

Having said what he'd wanted to say, Yuuki stepped off to the side.

"The hell do you mean 'sorry'!? Ugh, this stupid piece of shit!"

Bertolt angrily stepped forward and grabbed Yuuki's shoulder.

“You’ve really stepped in it now. To shamelessly get in our way like this. You really stand out – as a troublemaker!”

“Bertolt, leave him be.”

Stefan ordered him to stop before continuing on.

“But——”

“That’s an order.”

“...”

Bertolt clicked his tongue in displeasure, but let Yuuki go.

Their party started down the stairway. Out of the corner of his eye, Stefan noticed Franka, whom he could tell wanted to speak to him, but he ignored her.

Their raid this time would require their all. He couldn’t risk being distracted by something inconsequential.

“...Hey, Stefan.”

As they descended the stairs, Bertolt whispered to him.

“I have to say I’m pretty grateful to you. Because I was able to join your party, my arm was healed and I have this chance to clear my name. In truth, this party of yours is many times stronger than that useless bunch of misfits I used to run with. However——”

He intentionally lowered the volume of his voice yet further still.

“To give me an ‘order’ – who the hell do you think you are? Believe me, you don’t want to get on my bad side. I’m sure you understand – it’s best for everyone if you’re in my good graces, no?”

“...I understand.”

Was Stefan's sole response.

Once the silhouettes of Stefan and his group had disappeared entirely, Yuuki sighed.

"We've got his promise. It's our turn to go now."

"T-To go... Yuuki-san, why...?"

"And can I ask what's brought on this change of heart?"

"It's complicated."

Yuuki answered in a fiercely oversimplified manner as he started to walk.

"I'm pretty confident in our chances, even if I'm the only one. I'll explain as we go."

"But... it's too dangerous. For Yuuki-san and Tina-chan both."

"That sure is ironic coming from the one who'd planned to follow them by herself."

"Indeed."

Franka couldn't respond.

"Care to explain the reason for your confidence?" Alfred inquired.

"I already know where the other half is."

Franka and Alfred stared dumbly.

"...Really? Er, not that I don't trust you, but..."

"Gramps left behind some notes about it. There's no way he'd bother to record information that wasn't reliable, so it ought to be quite trustworthy."

Unfortunately, it's going to be a bit complicated getting there. We'll take care of it, but we'll need you guys to protect us in the meantime."

"B-But..."

Franka turned to Alfred, her eyes pleading for help.

"So how about it, Uncle? I think it's worth a shot."

"Well... sure."

"Master?!" Franka yelled.

The key lay in whether or not Franka would be able to pull herself together.

Truth was, setting aside whether or not victory over Stefan was even possible for the moment, it was vital that Franka be given the opportunity to exert her all.

If the process required that Franka focus on "protecting Yuuki and Tina," and not on what had been unsettling her, then so much the better. What was most important here was restraining her recklessness.

—That was likely what Alfred thought of their plan. Yuuki felt similarly.

"It's decided then. That said, Tina's with us as well, so we'll have to pace ourselves. I'll let you know when we've picked up the trail, so let's take it easy for now."

Let's rewind a bit.

Before the sun had risen, Yuuki and Tina walked the path back to their shop.

"So Master, exactly what kind of valorous deed did you have in mind?" Tina asked Yuuki, her eyes glittering.

"What do you think?"

“Hmm? Oh... I know, the Oath Legions think Tina’s a Void Beast, right? Well, I can put on a robe, and then when Franka defeats me before their eyes...”

“That’s way too suspicious. Your body can’t even be hurt; like hell you’d get defeated like that.”

“Hrm... How about I, um, play dead?”

“And if they insist on inspecting the corpse? In any case, trying to fake something like that is way too hard. Whether it be swordsmanship or cleric skills, one’s abilities can be gauged during training. When an attack that isn’t actually all that powerful defeats a mighty Void Beast, anyone could tell that something was up.”

“Well then, why don’t we try raiding then? We can go explore a floor farther down than anyone’s ever gone before. With my help, of course.”

“Even if we could pull it off, how could we prove it? Maybe if we were front-line adventurers, someone would believe us, but our party consists of a third-rank, a fourth-rank, a ninth-rank, and a child. If we claimed to have expanded the current map, who’d believe it?”

“Huh...”

Tina sank into silence.

Once they arrived back at the store, Yuuki made his way to the storehouse. There he pulled out several Reliquia and began to carefully choose between them.

“...Then what can we do?” the Shinki asked despairingly, having followed him into the room.

“——Before we get to that, there’s something I want to ask you. Why are you so insistent about helping her?” Yuuki asked without stopping what he was doing.

“I told you already, didn’t I? Because Tina’s one of the Shinki. That’s why it’s my desire that all the people of this city, and adventurers in particular, can be rewarded for their efforts. That should be obv—— Actually, no.”

Cutting herself off, Tina paused for a moment before she continued.

“Perhaps that’s not quite right... Maybe it’s simply that I don’t want to see darkness and gloom engulf the face of someone I know. I don’t want to see them get hurt. Franka is my... friend.”

“In that case, are you willing to work hard on her behalf?”

Tina nodded energetically.

“Okay. I’ll explain then. We just need to find the teleporter.”

“The one on the third floor? But that one’s already——”

“It’s already under their control, yes. However, the two only operate as a pair. It’s only once both have been activated that they can do any good. That’s why finding the other half is huge. I fear that’s the purpose of Stefan’s party. ——That’s where you come in – you can skip the looking and go straight to the finding.”

“Ohh...”

“We just have to let Franka ‘come across it.’ I’ll just make up something about Gramps having written some notes on its location. Even Stefan won’t be able to just ignore her after this.”

“I see! That’s amazing, Master! ——Oh, but...”

Tina’s face was beset with concern. Indeed, there were still many problems.

“Tina doesn’t remember on what floor she was born...”

“Right. We can’t do this the way a normal adventurer would; trying to figure it out as we go won’t work. There’s still a way, though. ——When you woke up, you heard the words of a prayer, and using your Shinki

powers, teleported over to the source of that urgent prayer. Do I have that right?”

“Mm.”

“Okay, when you described teleportation to me before, you said that in order to teleport, you first had to have a sense of both distance and direction. In other words, using the source of the prayer as your guide, you were able to determine both those values.”

“Yep.”

“Do you still remember those things?”

“Hmm, well...”

Tina pointed roughly straight up.

“About sixty or seventy meters upward.”

“The upper floors of the labyrinth have already been completely surveyed. According to those measurements, from the floor to the ceiling is roughly fifteen meters or so. Extrapolating those numbers, we can assume that the place where you were born was roughly four or five floors away from the place where Bertolt’s party was attacked.”

“Ohhh,” Tina called out, her eyes wide.

“Next, according to what Uncle Alfred said, the place where the humanoid Void Beast – that is, you – were sighted was the sixtieth floor. From that, we can determine that you were born on either the 64th or 65th floor. This is, of course, all assuming those floors aren’t particularly short and don’t have anything otherwise strange about them.”

“A-amazing, Master.”

“It’s just a little math. Anyway, your praise is premature; there’s still another problem to take care of.”

“Ah, right. Yeah, even if we know the destination——”

“——We can’t get there. Exactly. We need to think about that part.”

The room in which Tina had been born was on a level even deeper than the one which had led to the destruction of an elite adventurer party. Ordinarily speaking, it was simply impossible for them to make their way there.

“Oh, that reminds me. Let me confirm something first: if you had enough divine energy, could you warp directly there?”

“...Uh, without a clear target, I can’t.”

Teleportation required a precise knowledge of both the distance to, and the direction of, the destination. When she’d saved Bertolt previously, his prayer had served as the target. When she’d demonstrated her ability to teleport in the store before, she’d targeted the divine energy contained within the Reliquia hidden among the tree branches.

“Because the prayer was spoken directly to the Shinki, Tina could hear it. Also, because I’d seen the Divine Pearl before, I recognized the signature of its divine energy. That’s why even if I didn’t know where it was, I could still find it.”

This meant that if they wanted to teleport to the room in question, they’d either first need someone to make their way to the room where she’d been born, and then to pray in earnest or to place a Reliquia she’d once seen in that room.

“If the device in that room was activated, then it’s possible that I could home in on its signature, but unfortunately, I never activated it before arriving here. I won’t be able to use it as a target.”

“I know. ——I guess there’s nothing that can be done then?”

“Ahh! Don’t tell me you’re giving up, Master?!”

“Of course not. It just means we’ll have to rely on rather... unconventional methods. ——Here, look.”

From among the pile of Reliquia he'd taken from the storehouse, he pulled out a box and opened it.

“That’s the Divine Pearl from the other day? The one you used when testing Tina’s powers.”

“Yeah, this is the high-grade one of the pair. The only grade one Reliquia in this store. ——To be truthful, this is one of Franka’s father’s Reliquia.”

This was one of the items Franka had put up as collateral, and so it had always been stored and never made its way to the storefront. Because it was such a valuable item, Franka had yet to buy it back.

Yuuki lifted it out of the box. Its shape was that of an elongated oval, about half as long as his thumb.

“This can be used as a guide?”

“It has enough divine energy for it, yes. You ought to be able to feel it no matter the distance.”

“That’s certainly true, but... just who is going to take it there?”

Yuuki smiled.

“Why, Stefan will, of course.”

Just now, standing before the stairway from the first floor, as Stefan and Franka had spoken, Yuuki had stealthily placed the Divine Pearl in Bertolt’s waist satchel. It wasn’t so much that he’d targeted Bertolt specifically as that he happened to be a convenient target.

In this way, Tina would be able to trace them.

Even if he discovered it partway through, it wouldn’t change things one bit. There wasn’t a soul alive who would casually discard an unused Divine Pearl simply because they hadn’t noticed it before. The fact that it was a high quality item only made that a certainty. He’d either save it as a trump

card to be used when necessary or pocket it to be sold. Either way, that he would continue to carry it on his person was beyond question.

All that was left was to wait for them to reach the necessary depth of a kilometer; in other words, the 64th or 65th floors.

Upon discovering a vast room with a large tree planted within, it was an inevitability that they'd stop to investigate its presence. Whether their movements took them through narrow passages or into a large room, they'd be able to judge by tracing the Divine Pearl.

At which point, they'd use Tina's powers to teleport to their destination.

The third floor teleporter would never have activated without Tina's touch.

It was probably safe to assume that its counterpart far below was the same. There was simply no way for Stefan and his party to know for sure whether anything they found was truly the teleportation device or simply another large stone.

Once Tina activated the device, they'd teleport back to the third floor, concluding the duel.

From what Tina had gathered from the third floor device, it seemed it was possible to configure both the number of targets for, and the range of, teleportation. In short, they could leave Stefan's party behind and return alone.

Additionally, given that the third floor teleporter was likely guarded by members of the Sky's Oath Legion, once they teleported, both the guards and Stefan's party would be made witnesses to their success.

Be that as it may, it wasn't like there weren't any uncertain factors.

First of all, this all hinged on whether or not Stefan and his party ever made it to the room in question. It looked like they had made all necessary preparations to do so, but he could only pray that they made it safely there.

The other variable was Tina. Even though she'd consumed a fair amount of items from his store, she hadn't accumulated all that much divine energy regardless. Teleporting a far distance consumed a great amount of divine energy, and reserving enough energy for four people to both go and come back – a worst case scenario – was simply an impossibility.

For that reason, they'd decided that only Tina and himself would go. He obviously preferred to allow Franka to be the one to make the discovery, but given that party achievements were recorded on a per-party basis, it didn't truly matter in the end.

The second they disappeared, Alfred would undoubtedly notice and return to the surface for help. They'd wait for the rescue party at the third floor, explaining that they'd been teleported to the sixty-somethingth floor where they'd stumbled upon the device enabling their return.

Not a word of this had been spoken to either Franka or Alfred. There was simply no way to explain the plan without first explaining both Tina's powers and her connection to the room in question – both things that Yuuki would prefer went unmentioned.

“Get back!” Franka yelled.

At the same time, a Void Beast – a rabbit with long fangs – burst into flame.

Alfred stood in front, preventing the Void Beast's forward movement as Franka sought the appropriate moment to use an Orison to end the beast. This was a very basic style of combat. The teamwork of the two was wonderfully fluid, their coordination perfect.

Yuuki, who had no experience working with anyone else, couldn't help but feel sincere admiration at the sight.

Neither he nor Tina were taking part in the battle, and had taken the role of wards to be protected. Their job was instead to keep watch over the rear as needed.

They were currently on the 15th floor of the labyrinth.

Once the tenth floor had been reached, it was rare to encounter another adventurer. Additionally, the danger posed by Void Beasts gradually, but steadily, increased. That notwithstanding, they were still feeling fine.

The party easily dispatched the few Void Beasts that crossed their path as they continued forward.

“...You understand that you’re to avoid rushing to the front at all costs?” Yuuki whispered to the person beside him.

“Right now I’m trying to save divine energy, not avoid using it entirely. Even if, under the restrictions imposed on the Shinki, I can’t attack, I can at least help restrict the movements of the Void Beasts,” Tina said somewhat reluctantly.

Although her breathing was slightly faster than normal, she nonetheless seemed to be able to handle things. Because the three other members of the party were adapting themselves to her pace, she was able to keep up.

“The sentiment’s what’s important here. If they discover that you can’t be hurt, things could get a little bothersome. If it helps, think of it this way – any divine energy you waste here puts you that much farther from ever summoning your Duelist.”

“I’ve said it before, haven’t I? What kind of Shinki would I be if I couldn’t save the people before me? Franka and Alfred are good people; I like them. After my divine energy returns and I summon my Duelist, I plan to let them continue to work under me. ——Oh, you too, if you want to, Master.”

“So I’m just an afterthought, huh. Anyway, allow me to continue to state my preference for tangible rewards. Plus, you’re better off not having me as a subordinate.”

In order for things to work out, the reward from the Church of the Five Holies had better be substantial. Just the sunk cost of the items Tina had consumed had been beyond hefty.

After they’d walked for some time, Alfred turned to face them.

“Are you fine if we continue like this?”

“I’m fine up until the 25th floor. However——”

Yuuki spared Tina a quick glance. It was probably about time for a short break.

Honestly speaking, the only thing that mattered was whether or not Stefan’s party made it, so it wasn’t like they were in any particular hurry.

“Ah, right. Let’s take a breather then.”

Hearing that, Tina sat down on the ground, taking some unknown dried fruit from the wryly smiling Alfred. The sour-sweet taste helped to relieve her exhaustion.

“——You feeling okay, Tina-chan?”

Franka walked over to Yuuki’s side. She, let alone Alfred, didn’t look the least bit weary.

“She was the one who wanted to come along, so there’s no need to worry.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Franka sighed.

“I was too reckless. Everyone’s been dragged into this because of me...”

“Reckless is right,” Yuuki readily acknowledged. “If running off on your own like that isn’t recklessness, then what is? If you were gonna regret it this much, you should have just not done it in the first place.”

“I guess that’s true, huh...”

“But—— We all followed you of our own accord. Don’t forget that. Oh, myself included, of course.”

Franka lifted her head in surprise. After a short moment, she uttered a soft, "...Thank you."

Yuuki sighed. He'd been thinking this entire time that he'd been acting very much unlike his normal self. Perhaps Tina's personality had been rubbing off on him.

—Well, if he was gonna meddle in someone else's business anyway, then this was a good opportunity. Might as well have what needed to be said, said.

"So, in the end, who was the one who killed your father? Stefan?"

Franka's eyes opened wide at Yuuki's question, and she answered, her words coming forth a little at a time.

"...Not long after I had become an adventurer, I heard a rumor from others I had begun to associate with. 'Among the Sky's Oath Legion, there's an arrogant bastard who claims to have slain the master of a celestial Dragon Fang weapon.' Because there wasn't any evidence to be found, his claims were taken as mad ramblings."

Franka's father had been the previous master of the AmnisBlue Water Pike. This, Yuuki had heard before.

"Father passed away on the 52nd floor. At the time, he was the leader of a party of five or six. Of their number, the ones who were witness to his final moments were Bertolt and Stefan, those two. —Oh, did you know he's my brother?"

"Uncle mentioned it. Same mother, but different fathers, right?"

"Yes. My mother was a former servant of the Klose house, a concubine of the previous head of the house. Even before my brother was born, he was already getting on in years. Before long, he passed away. Nii-san was allowed to remain in the household, but my mother was cast out. My father, who was a combat instructor of the Klose's at the time, saved her. Many things happened, and eventually I was born."

“I heard your relationship with Stefan used to be pretty good when you were young?”

Franka nodded.

“Every now and then, Father would secret him over to meet Mother. We’d play together often. Even if he was a bit distant, he was still very kind. Yes, back then, he was very kind.”

The scene of that man playing joyfully with his young sister was impossible to imagine. On every occasion he’d seen Stefan, the man’s face might as well have been crafted from iron.

“Even then, however, he was already like this; you could never tell what he was thinking. When it comes to his emotions and other things, he’s a rather unreasonable person.”

For a brief moment, a look of pure nostalgia filled her gaze, and then vanished.

“When it came to the man who claimed he had ‘killed Father’; well, who that was was immediately obvious. Rumor had it that all it took was the least bit of alcohol to loosen his lips and he’d share the story. Nii-san has never been the kind of person who’d boast about that sort of thing, so that left only one person.”

Yuuki looked up. Both Tina and Alfred were listening attentively, though neither spoke a word. They’d relegated themselves to the position of an enrapt audience.

“...And so you requested certain proof using the Shinki’s power of miracles?”

Franka shook her head in response to Yuuki’s question.

“No. I’d already heard such rumors two years ago. ——You know, aren’t plays always saying things like, ‘Revenge doesn’t gain you anything,’ or ‘The one who died wouldn’t want you to do this either’?”

Yuuki frowned. Such sayings *sounded* noble, but were ultimately not only hollow, but easier said than done.

Seeing Yuuki's expression, Franka chuckled.

"Yuuki-san, it seems those sayings offend you. I know how you feel. Emotions are, by their very nature, not things that are that simply controlled. However——"

Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"I wanted to try."

"..."

"It was incredibly painful. I was unable to suppress my raging emotions and unable to simply accept what had happened and move on, but I wanted to try. To leave hate and resentment behind. To let go of the past and focus on the joy available to me in the present."

Yuuki held his silence as Franka continued to speak.

"You know, I think that way of living is correct. The rescue by Yuuki-san, Boris-san's consideration, and Master Alfred's instruction – even if the pain and sorrow never disappeared... I've still been very happy, you know?"

She smiled faintly.

"And so Nii-san and I grew apart. The rare occasions when we'd run into one another at the training school, I always felt rather awkward; I didn't know how to act around him. ——Then on that day, when I saw him in your shop... Bertolt had become a companion of his – a comrade."

——Ah. Now things made sense.

The brash murderer of her father and her gentle, beloved brother had formed a party together. Such a scene would shake anyone to the core.

“I know that professionalism requires that personal feelings be kept separate from duties, but when I heard that he’d join their party at Nii-san’s request! I couldn’t understand what he was thinking. I ran to confront him, and do you know what he said? That Father died because he was weak. —That was when I went to the Shinki, and petitioned to see what had truly happened.”

“...And what did you see?”

Franka took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. She looked Yuuki directly in the eyes and answered.

“The 52nd floor. Their party had split up, and my father was exploring with the other two as a three-man group. They were ambushed by a Void Beast, and my father was injured while protecting the others. Despite his wounds, he nevertheless dispatched the Void Beast – only to be run through by the sword of the very man he had been protecting.”

Her voice trembled.

“He mocked him as he killed him, insulting him even as he stabbed him over and over. Finally, he laughed loudly as if filled with joy. How he must have loathed my father. Although I could not smell, hear, or feel – only see – I wanted to vomit.”

“And that person was...?”

“Bertolt. Exactly who I thought it’d be. It wasn’t surprising in the least.”

Her voice had already returned to normal.

“But it’s not like I wanted to know who killed him; I’d already known all along. What I desired to learn was what Nii-san was doing as that went on. Nii-san, he——”

Franka gave a light smile, looking as though her heart had been rent in twain.

“He did nothing at all. Even though he was there, weapon in hand, he didn’t try to stop him at all; he just stood there, watching. Watching as my father was murdered.”

“Ha.”

Alongside the unenthused shout, four dog-like heads flew. Spraying blood, their carcasses fell over.

“——What the hell – they’re so weak,” Jahar said, bored, as he rested his sword against his shoulder.

The Void Beasts of the fortieth floor, though not few in number, were nonetheless slain by a lone individual. They had, after all, been enlisted into the ranks of the Oath Legions on account of their stunning strength.

“...Don’t be so pleased with yourself, brat.”

Bertolt clicked his tongue. Because his entire party had been lost, Jahar constantly mocked him, labeling him a beaten dog. The relationship between the two was extraordinarily poor.

Even given the circumstances, however, Bertolt was definitely not someone to be taken lightly. Although inferior to Jahar in both range and raw destructive power, the unpredictable nature of the swordsmanship with which he wielded his scimitar nevertheless left his prey in equally dire straits.

The problem was that he thought nothing of exploiting or sacrificing others – an attitude highly unsuitable for a leader. The fact that his party had been annihilated was something he bore responsibility for, Stefan was sure.

“So are we just going to keep an eye out for the stone monument as we progress?”

“No, that comes later. First, we need to descend as far as possible in one go.”

They wouldn't need to stop until the fiftieth floor, since those floors had been mapped by the Oath Legions already. He'd taken a look at the maps before setting out; no record of any device like the one found on the third floor existed.

For that reason, spending any amount of time in these floors would simply be a waste of time. No, they needed to focus their time on those deeper floors where the maps were lacking. Moreover, if they intended to concentrate their efforts in the deeper levels, they needed to reserve their energy and items. Simply put, their immediate objective was simply to continue forward.

To press continually forward was a guiding principle for the Klose. From the moment they were born, the men of the Klose house were thrown into the deep end, and this concept instilled in them. This was true even for Stefan, whom was both the youngest child as well as the son of a concubine.

Yes, discard fear, seek strength, and press forward.

“Please, take me with you.”

At that moment, the image of his half-sister flashed through his mind.

——Too foolish. Such an act hadn't been inspired by courage but by rashness.

The owner of that garbage shop had mentioned something about beating them to the teleporter; surely they didn't actually believe such a thing was possible? For a party like that to reach even the thirtieth floor would be no small feat. It wasn't anything he needed to concern himself with.

“Tch. Here they come again,” Bertolt growled.

The Void Beast this time had the body of a snake, two heads, and eight slender legs, like an insect. It wasn't alone either, though they'd already encountered into several packs of Void Beasts hunting together.

Stefan exhaled lightly, and the AmnisBlue Water Pike appeared in his hand.

The second he felt the sensation of the weapon in his hand, he felt its presence deep within his heart. *Use me, it said. Slaughter our enemies.*

For the space of a breath, he swung his weapon without pause. In that brief instant, six beasts were killed.

The AmnisBlue Water Pike pierced through the scales of the Void Beasts like a hot knife through butter. In a blink, the serpentine Void Beast became nothing recognizable.

Void Beasts appearing on the fortieth or fiftieth levels simply did not have the power necessary to stand as his opponent.

Rather, he was fairly certain that there wasn't anyone or anything that could stand against him anymore.

His companions quickly dealt with the Void Beasts they were facing, finishing just a bit slower than Stefan.

"Good. Let's continue, but we need to pick up the pace," Stefan called out as he started walking once more.

—*I've become strong.*

Yes, when compared to that time— when compared to that time, I've become much, much stronger.

The structure of the 31st through 35th floors was special.

They consisted of a large, cylindrical tor standing five floors high.

Adventurers who reached the 31st floor had to descend roughly 75 meters down the nearly vertical cliff face.

“...Are you going to be alright?” Franka asked Tina worriedly.

“N-No problem. I-I can k-keep going. A c-cliff of this level i-is nothing!”

Tina alternated between gasping for air and trying to put on a brave face. Although they’d made sure to take frequent breaks, she was nearly at her limit.

“If she can’t go any farther, I can carry her on my back, Uncle.”

“Are you really okay, Yuuki-san? You’re not tired...?”

“You guys have been protecting us the entire time. I’m completely uninjured, so I’m still completely rested. I climb mountains frequently when I head there to gather herbs. When it comes to this, I don’t think I’d lose to another adventurer. Moreover, there’s still a bit of a path we can take.”

Because of the constant raiding that went on in this labyrinth, the road down this tor – that is, the road to the 36th floor – was well-established. One simply had to follow the anchored chains marking the path, making descent a much easier task.

Although at first glance, the path seemed so treacherous as to be impassable, the truth was that several flat terraces protruded from the cliff face like steps, providing places to rest. It thus did not take a superhuman constitution to traverse.

“...I think knowing when to give up is also a kind of courage.”

“We’re almost there. Let’s keep going,” Yuuki replied in response to Alfred’s comment.

He wasn’t lying. He’d heard from Tina just a moment before that Stefan’s party had just sped their way through the latter half of the fiftieth floor. It was just a matter of time now.

“Is that so? Well, I’ll leave it to the two of you then. Oh, one more thing. Though they’re rare, Void Beasts do appear here, so be careful.”

As Alfred finished speaking, the party began to descend as one.

“...Didn’t you say you’d carry Tina on your back, Master?”

“I said I would if it proved absolutely necessary. You still look lively enough to me.”

“So not gentle. ——Oh well.”

Tina’s face showing her displeasure, she walked the path leading down the tor.

Of the five floors, the first floor was still relatively easy going; the hardest being the third floor. The third floor was a nearly vertical precipice, requiring all limbs grasping the cliff face. Even experienced adventurers would occasionally run into accidents here.

It was definitely impossible for Tina to cross that portion of the trip; Yuuki figured he’d carry her on his back during that part, but——

“I-I-I-I can’t! Can’tcan’tcan’tcan’tcan’tcan’tcan’t!”

Tina shook, her eyes filled with tears.

“Forget the third floor, we’ve only taken three steps. C’mon, let’s go.”

“B-B-B-But... it’s t-t-t-oo h-h-high!”

“Well, we’re five floors up; of course it’s high. It’s just that, unlike hiking in the mountains, the drop’s pretty vertical, so it looks pretty scary.”

It wasn’t like she’d get hurt even if she fell, but a fear of heights wasn’t rational anyway.

“L-L-L-Looking down, t-t-the floor... it’s too f-f-far away!”

“It’s only scary if you look down. Stop that.”

“...I know how you feel,” Franka said admiringly.

In the end, Yuuki had borrowed some cord from Alfred and tied Tina to his back.

“W-When we get to the bottom, let me know, okay, Master?”

“Sure, sure. Just don’t move around, alright?”

“No problem. My eyes are gonna be closed super tight. —Yeah, as long as Tina doesn’t look, then no matter what kind of terrifying, hellish scene awaits, Tina won’t be scared. Fufufu, now all that’s left is to deceive myself. Alright, Tina, let’s imagine this. It’s nice and flat here, nice and flat. Flatflatflatflatflatflatflat...”

Hah... If she was happy distracting herself like that, then that was up to her.

Yuuki suddenly noticed Franka’s envious gaze, fixated on Tina, whom was strapped to his back.

“You’re not afraid of heights, Franka?”

“Ah. No, I’m not. What a waste.”

“A waste?”

“Er, nothing. *Ahem* A-Anyway, I’ve already been here many times, so no, I’m not afraid.”

Her steps were indeed steady. Although endurance wasn’t a requirement for clerics, she appeared to be in very good physical condition.

The dark atmosphere that had hung around her when she’d been discussing the circumstances of her father’s passing earlier was gone. She was back to her normal self – a serious and determined young girl.

But that didn’t mean the problem had been resolved.

Even if she finally attained the opportunity to speak to Stefan and Bertolt on equal terms, how would things turn out for her? How would even that help her find peace?

No, it's better that I not get involved in this any more than I already have, Yuuki warned himself.

Even what he'd done so far had already pulled him in too deeply.

Don't forget. Don't think too much. You don't have that right.

——Suddenly, his hair was yanked.

“What's up? We still have a long way to go.”

“Master... The Oath Legion party has stopped moving,” Tina whispered into his ear.

His expression sobered instantly.

“How far are they?”

“About 500 meters down – about the 64th floor.”

Both the size and ferocity of Void Beasts directly correlated with the depth of the labyrinth.

By the end of the thirtieth floor, Void Beasts began to be of a size comparable with humans. By the fortieth and fiftieth floors, it was common to have to look up at them.

Once things hit that point, it took some effort even for the very best of the Oath Legions. However——

“Ha!”

The spear flashed, and a hole appeared in the head of the three-eyed lizard. Having lost its control center, the large body collapsed upon the ground.

“Haha, very nicely done there, Stefan – killing three by yourself, eh?” Jahar praised him cheerfully.

The power of a celestial Dragon Fang weapon was simply unparalleled. When facing well-armored beasts like the lizard he’d just killed, their most effective formation had Stefan as a lone vanguard with support provided by the two clerics.

The complete opposite of Jahar, Bertolt was fuming, having realized the gap in power between Stefan and himself. His own party had fallen at the sixtieth floor, but they were even now before the stairs descending down from the 63rd floor, which was already one floor below the farthest reached to date.

Stefan didn’t particularly care one way or another, though. Comparing oneself with another was a waste of time. The only thing that mattered was determining how to push his limits yet further still.

——This way of thinking had been taught to him by the previous master of the spear he now wielded.

“Any hint of the Dragon Fang Gem’s location?” Stefan asked Bertolt.

“...No clue. It definitely wasn’t on the floor above, though.”

“What an unreliable eyewitness. Speaking of which, are you sure you even know what you saw?” Jahar interrupted.

“If you want to know where it went, then you should ask it. How the hell would I know where it went?”

“Enough. ——Let’s go,” Stefan announced to the four others, heading for the stairs.

Suddenly, as he reached the next floor, he came to a stop with an odd look on his face.

“What is this...?” Bertolt whispered from behind him.

A miraculous scene unveiled itself before their eyes.

Reaching out from the end of the stairway was an enormous room. It was utterly unlike any of the other floors they’d ever seen, which were all twisting, winding paths. It was an unimaginable sight.

The floor and walls were covered with glowing moss, providing enough light to see even unaided by a light stone. Other types of lush vegetation similarly draped the walls and floors. Nor was there so much as a hint of Void Beasts in the area.

“...Stick together,” Stefan reminded his companions as he entered the room.

Within grew an enormous tree. Utterly belying its location, situated in the deepest reaches of the labyrinth, the tree and its thick trunk, mass of branches, and luxurious green leaves looked as if it had bathed in the sunlight for years.

The trunk sported a large hole positioned around waist-height. Taking care, Stefan peeked in – it was empty.

“Hey, Stefan. Look; over there.”

One of the clerics pointed at a wall.

There stood a large vertical piece of stone. Its shape was reminiscent of a stele – yes, just like the teleportation device from the third floor.

Stefan approached it and gave it a gentle tap.

——The cold rigidity of normal stone passed through his fingertips. He felt nothing of the pulsing warmth of the device on the third floor.

“Is that not it?” Jahar asked.

“It doesn’t seem to be, no. —Still, it’s probably best to investigate this room further. Let’s set up camp by the wall and then we’ll resume exploration,” Stefan directed.

“—At the room already? They’re faster than we expected,” Yuuki murmured as he carefully followed the path down.

His original estimate had placed them at the room about the time they finished descending this rocky pillar. They were even more capable than he’d thought.

“What should we do, Master?”

“Well, most importantly, keep an eye on the road. Once we descend another level, there should be a place to rest. We can make for the 64th floor once we’re there. Perhaps we ought to hint to Uncle that they should head back first——”

Yuuki suddenly stopped as he realized that Tina was looking at him strangely.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’ve been here before, haven’t you, Master? You sure seem familiar with the area.”

“...”

“You know, considering their skills, wouldn’t a ninth-rank adventurer usually operate solely on the upper floors?”

“I heard about this place from someone else.”

Hmmm, Tina murmured, sounding utterly unconvinced. She continued, “You know, I’ve spent some time thinking about the labyrinth, and there’s

one thing that really strikes me as odd. ——At the beginning, Tina ran without stopping, before collapsing after running out of strength. You picked me up then, right, Master?”

“Right.”

“I have to admit that I don’t remember much from my attempted escape, but... The last time we came together, didn’t I run out of energy at the third floor? Even if I was far more desperate back then, and continued until I was completely spent, at most I could only have crossed six, maybe seven floors. Furthermore, the floor that Bertolt guy was attacked on was the sixtieth floor. If we count seven floors up from that—— Master, you were traveling entirely by yourself – just what floor did you find me on?”

“...Uh, well——”

Just as he was about to answer, a voice sounded in his ear.

“Watch out on the left! Three Void Beasts incoming!”

Alfred drew and swung his sword as he shouted the warning. One of the Void Beasts, beheaded, fell down the cliff.

It was bird-like, with a wingspan of three meters. It had razor-sharp talons and its beak was filled with teeth.

Although the path was dangerous, Alfred’s move to action was as speedy as ever.

“There’s no time to dodge; attack it, Franka!”

“Roger!”

One hand gripping the support chains tightly, Franka withdrew two Divine Pearls with her free hand.

Practically simultaneously, two orange balls of flame flew at the Void Beasts.

The first hit a Void Beast directly, and it plunged to its death below.

The other missed the main body of the next Void Beast, striking its wings instead. Losing its balance, it changed direction – straight for Yuuki.

“——Ha!”

Yuuki kicked off the wall and grabbed hold of a rocky outcropping above him. Ignoring the frightened cries of Tina, swinging wildly on his back, he took a tremendous leap, landing on another rock.

The Void Beast grazed past his leg and slammed into the cliff wall. A close call indeed.

“T-Thank goodness! I’m sorry; it’s my fault for missing it!” Franka exclaimed.

Alfred’s face showed his relief.

——At that moment, two unexpected things occurred.

First, the support chain anchored to the cliff wall suddenly gave way, torn apart by the Void Beast.

Secondly, the Void Beast, its wings flaming and its head concussed, flailed wildly against the cliff wall.

With a roar, the rock face shook wildly – leaving Franka standing on nothing but empty air.

Yuuki instantly thrust out his arm. Though the speed of his reaction far surpassed that of an ordinary individual, it was late nonetheless. Furthermore, not only did he fail to catch hold of Franka, he lost his own balance in the process.

——If they fell, it would be to their death.

He made a snap judgment. He leapt into the open air, and gave a command to Tina.

“Tina, teleport the three of us now!”

The scenery warped before their eyes.

There were two secrets to a fulfilled life.

The first was to thoroughly enjoy those things that you liked. The other was to thoroughly eradicate any trace of those things you despised.

——That was the creed of one Bertolt, first-ranked adventurer and member of the Oath Legions.

What he enjoyed was the sight of human flesh tearing apart in a spray of blood.

What he hated were people who were hardworking or otherwise exceptional.

That’s why, from his point of view, the killing of his fellow humans was a two for one deal, really.

His goal was but some thirty meters before him. He walked without fear, as though he were in the city, slowly closing in on his target. He didn’t seem to have been noticed.

This is a once in a lifetime opportunity, Bertolt thought to himself.

——Yes, the target was that prissy party leader of his, Stefan Klose.

When Stefan had joined the Sky’s Oath Legion at the age of fifteen, Bertolt had first met him. Although he’d been both young and skilled, he was nonetheless just another inexperienced little brat.

But out of nowhere, he’d become a rank one adventurer and his party leader.

And now he even dared to order Bertolt around, as if he were some kind of subordinate.

How could he possibly stand for such an affront? ——Simple – he wouldn't.

Be that as it may, a frontal approach at that brat from the Klose house who wielded both power and authority was dangerous.

Despite his coarse nature, Bertolt was quite skilled at planning. He'd never forget to account for his own safety first and foremost. Even when it was time to act, he'd need to be careful. If he couldn't control himself, couldn't hide his distaste, then he'd risk being found out by Jahar. That was what he'd repeated to himself over and over again——

But this opportunity is too good to waste.

Deep within his heart, he laughed.

They'd just about finished examining the room, having found nothing of note, and were resting. Stefan, however, had for some unknown reason, left the camp and wandered off on his own.

For some strange reason, this 64th floor didn't seem to be home to any Void Beasts. The large and spacious room took up approximately two-thirds of the entire floor, with the remaining third belonging to the corridor encircling the room. Its design was simplistic indeed. Because of the large number of plants in the area, there were many spots in which to hide, making it a trivial task to tail Stefan without his knowledge.

He'd sneak up on him once he'd reached the appropriate location and then sever his limbs in one go. He'd stuff his mouth full of his hand or something, and with his prey unable to cry out, take his time chopping him into pieces.

As he imagined the look on Stefan's face just before death, he was filled with an overpowering ecstasy. The only thing on his mind tonight was murder.

He was suddenly struck, however, by the impression that something was strange.

His target didn't seem to have been looking for a place to relieve himself – just where the hell was he going, anyway?

——Then again, who cared?

He was moments from death anyway; there was little point in exploring his motivations.

They'd finally gone far enough away from the camp. No one would hear any noise they made now.

Bertolt licked his lips in anticipation as he drew his scimitar. He was now at a distance to cut the other man down.

At that moment——

“Nii-san! Watch out!”

A voice cried out from behind him.

Franka clearly recalled falling from the cliff face, and the terror of impending doom.

But in the next instant, the scene before her eyes changed...and then she was standing here, her feet planted on solid ground.

A different scene was now playing out before her – Bertolt, his sword drawn, attempting to cut down Stefan from behind.

By the time she regained control of conscious thought, she'd already screamed.

Both Stefan and Bertolt turned to face her.

“...Franka, is it? Stefan’s sister?”

Bertolt frowned, not believing his eyes.

“How long have you been standing there?”

She must have been teleported. Though she had no proof, how else could she explain her sudden appearance here after her treacherous fall?

——No, that wasn’t important right now.

“You—— You dared ambush Nii-san from behind?”

“The hell are you talking about, girl?” Bertolt countered, a look of indignation on his face as he shrugged.

“Don’t play dumb! Your sword——”

“Our party leader wandered off alone; I was just making sure he was safe. When you’re in this labyrinth, you can’t let your guard down for even an instant, you know? I’m not like Stefan; I don’t have a weapon that can just appear at will.”

“——”

Franka, wordless, looked to her brother for help.

“...What do you think you’re doing?” Stefan asked emotionlessly.

——Asking not Bertolt, but Franka.

“I’m not sure if I hit some sort of teleporter or something... But what’s important is that he had his sword drawn, about to attack——”

“He said it was for protection.”

Stefan’s cold words made Franka’s blood boil.

“Why? Why are you always protecting that man?! He’s the one who killed Father...”

Franka was so infuriated she couldn’t even finish her sentence. Bertolt stared at her with a searching expression before finally breaking out into a smile.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh. I remember now. You’re that man’s daughter.”

“...The thought of killing my father brings a smile to your lips?”

“What are you going on about now? —Anyway, let me teach you something important. What matters isn’t the ‘dead,’ but the ‘living.’ I, who am alive, am able to offer Reliquia to the Shinki. Your father, who is dead, is worthless. —You should try and do your best to forget him too, you know?”

“——!”

Enraged past the point of rationality, Franka forgot herself for a moment. Unconsciously, she pulled out a Divine Pearl for attack.

Her action was interrupted partway through.

——Stefan’s AmnisBlue Water Pike was leveled at her throat.

“Nii...san?”

She blinked in shock.

Compared to being interrupted, the shock from having her brother point his weapon at her was infinitely greater.

Deep within her heart, Franka had always believed that her gentle brother still loved her, but was simply awkward when it came to expressing those feelings. That illusion had just been shattered.

“I don’t care what you want. As I’ve already said, strength is everything in this place. Do you have the strength to show what you believe is right?”

“...”

“I have no desire to speak with you further. Leave.”

“...No.”

Franka’s eyes had filled with tears, but she continued to stare at Stefan.

“Didn’t you respect Father, Nii-san? How could you——”

As if to deny her right to speak, the spear flew forward. Franka, unable to watch, closed her eyes tightly.

Perhaps he’d showed her leniency or perhaps he’d never intended to pierce her from the beginning, intending only to threaten her.

Whatever the reason – the spear’s tip never touched her skin.

“——That’s enough, Stefan.”

Yuuki, standing off to the side, gripped the shaft of the spear with one hand.

When they’d fallen from the cliff face, Tina had teleported the three of them to the 64th floor.

In their desperate circumstances, Tina hadn’t been able to execute the teleportation as neatly as she might have otherwise done. As a result, Tina and Yuuki had been teleported a short distance off from Franka. Returning to her side had taken some time.

“Why are you so mad? She’s harmless, so there’s no need to get so excited. Don’t tell me it’s the hobby of front-line adventurers to pick on the weak?”

Yuuki had originally assumed that Stefan would simply ignore him. He certainly never expected the strong, steely gaze that was leveled his way.

“And you, Mr. Trash Shop Owner? Are you confident enough to step in, to do more than talk?”

Yuuki frowned. Something was off; this degree of stubbornness was utterly unlike Stefan’s normal unfeeling self.

“——Sure, why don’t we give it a shot?”

“...”

In response to Yuuki’s words, his opponent’s bloodlust intensified. At that point——

“There’s no need to worry... uh, Stefan, was it?”

An unexpected voice sounded out. Tina walked in from behind, an innocent look on her face as she continued, “Master and Tina are both Franka’s friends. That’s why you don’t need to worry; we’ll protect her no matter what happens. There’s no need to be so guarded.”

An atmosphere of stunned silence took hold of the scene.

“...Oi, you. What the heck are you saying now?”

“I should ask you that, Master,” Tina replied, smiling. “Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed? There was never any reason to fight. The reason that Stefan guy hasn’t raised a hand against that detestable adventurer and the reason that Franka’s father, an exceptionally skilled man, couldn’t defend himself... if you think about it a little, you ought to understand. The answer is right before your eyes.”

Before his eyes...? Yuuki frowned.

Tina sighed.

“Just a moment ago, did you really think he was about to hurt Franka? If you ask me, I think it was quite the contrary; he was protecting her.”

“Protecting... Why protecting?”

“That man.”

Tina turned to face Bertolt, giving him a withering glare.

“Huh? The hell are you talking about, you little brat.”

“...Huh. So that’s how it is.”

Yuuki finally grasped what Tina had been trying to convey.

It didn’t matter who the true instigator had been; the second Franka attacked Bertolt – or even displayed the slightest degree of hostility – he’d cut her down in “self-defense.” To prevent that from happening, Stefan had intervened.

“Once you understand that, it all makes sense, right? ——Why this man runs free.”

If you couldn’t defeat someone in a straight fight, you’d try to take control of the situation in other ways. Simply put, you’d target your opponent’s weaknesses.

“——For example, something like this might have been said. ‘If anything were to happen to me – anything whatsoever – then the person you hold most dear will die. Even if I’m caught and imprisoned, you can be sure that my subordinates will kill her. I don’t care how many years it takes – sooner or later, she will be killed.’”

As Yuuki finished speaking, Bertolt clicked his tongue.

To be honest, it was quite possible he’d never actually said those words out loud. When it came to someone like him, some things didn’t need to be said; the second those thoughts crossed the mind of his opponent, the damage was done. Even if you were 99% sure he was lying, bluffing, as long there remained even the slightest possibility the life of your most important person rested in his hands, you couldn’t put your all into a fight.

“Yeah. You know his subordinate organization of ‘Rats’ is immense, right? To watch the actions of all of them is simply impossible. Given the inability

to stop them, letting the target know her every movement was being watched would only serve to fill her life with fear.”

There was only one person whom both Stefan and her father held as their “most precious person.”

Everyone’s gaze turned to the person in question.

“Eh...?” Franka murmured unconsciously. “Don’t tell me... it’s... me?”

“...”

Stefan didn’t respond.

Franka’s father had been killed three years ago. At the time, Stefan had only been fourteen or fifteen.

Although he’d already been a member of the Oath Legions back then, but having been an eyewitness to an unprecedented scene, would he really be able to stand as a witness against a senior of the Legion – especially when he needed to protect his sister at all costs?

“Hey hey, how dare you speak that kinda crap without any evidence? The bond between Stefan and I is born of trust. ——Speaking of which, I hope you still remember the cost of crossing me, Stefan?”

Bertolt rested his drawn scimitar on his shoulder as he laughed mockingly.

Stefan exhaled slowly, before speaking.

“...You have no proof. In any case, it’s not like any of this has anything to do with you in the first place.”

“Nii-san!”

“You really shouldn’t talk that way. Yuuki and I aside, you know you’re hurting her when you do this, right?”

Tina completely ignored Stefan’s rare look of bewilderment as she spoke.

“That said, given what a busybody I am, I have more to say. Stefan, I understand why you seek so desperately after strength and obsess over results. First of all, you know that if you make an offering to the Shinki, you can receive a miracle from them. You wish to borrow the power of the Shinki to learn a certain thing.”

Franka had wanted to see the scene of her father’s passing.

So what Stefan desired to know was——

“——The relationship between Bertolt and the Rats, right?” Yuuki filled in.

Tina nodded.

“That’s right. Now then, the second reason for his actions. If his standing among the Oath Legions rose to prominence, he’d have many men under his command. ——Taking these two things together, we can see that his plan was to grasp the movements of Bertolt’s subordinates, the Rats, and eliminate them in a single strike.”

The smug look on Bertolt’s face faded.

“If we put it all together, then the reason Stefan’s sought after strength so desperately is simple indeed. ——To bring that man into the labyrinth, and eliminate the threat with his own two hands.”

——Even now, the memories of that time were crystal clear.

His master had been wounded protecting Bertolt from an ambush by a Void Beast. After the battle was over, Bertolt had made his way to his master’s side; originally, Stefan’s thought was that he intended to care for him. However——

“The sight of you makes me sick.”

Bertolt took hold of his beloved scimitar and ran his master through.

“You’re such a busybody; always sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong. Not to mention full of hot air.”

Again and again his master was stabbed.

“Oh, you still plan to fight back? That’s fine. Just know that if I don’t return, my comrades have orders to kill that cute little girl of yours. Her name’s Franka right? She’s what, twelve? Thirteen? They sure are cute at that age. —You know, from the very start, I’d planned on ending you on this trip, so I made sure to make some… preparations.”

His master’s hands fell powerlessly to the ground. Stefan’s heart filled with despair.

He was only fifteen. His master aside, he wasn’t even fit to be Bertolt’s opponent.

Be that as it may, if his master asked his help, he would join the fight in the next moment. It wasn’t as though he didn’t fear death at Bertolt’s hands, but he would fight nonetheless.

Alas, his master never asked. He simply lay there helplessly as Bertolt stabbed him time and again, his gaze fixed on Stefan and his lips mouthing the words, “Do. Not. Help.”

Bertolt gave his master one final stab before turning to laugh at Stefan, his face drenched in blood.

“He died because he was too weak, right? Don’t you agree?”

If he were to kill a child of the Klose house, the incident would explode out of control. Bertolt’s goal was thus to intimidate him into never speaking. This Stefan understood. Perhaps Bertolt also thought to bind him by tying him in as a co-conspirator.

Truth be told, Stefan was very much afraid. He was terrified of this man who so casually robbed others of their lives.

Returning to the surface, he broke the news of her father's death to his master's daughter, his sister.

She'd simply held her silence, not uttering a word, until finally, she asked, "...Why?"

Why... did Father have to die?

Why... didn't you save him?

Why... did you just stand by and watch?

Why... why... why...

Thus echoed the sounds of a guilty conscience with words Franka had never spoken. Nevertheless, the sound of her voice resounded in his ears over and over.

From that time forward, his half-sister became a symbol of both his weakness and his sin. Each time he saw her, he was brought back to that moment. Thus, unable to stand being near her, he deliberately maintained his distance.

Stefan desired vengeance. He needed it.

"He died because he was too weak." —There was certainly an element of truth in that statement.

And so it would be an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. This he vowed.

To that end, he trained ceaselessly. He never let go of his spear for a second, even as his hands sweat blood. Even as the skin on his hands regrew, calloused and tougher than before, he continued to swing his spear until his hands bled once more.

Only one thing was on his mind – to take what Bertolt had done to his master, and return him every iota. With his own two hands, he would visit an end both humiliating and tragic on that man.

He himself knew better than anyone just how obsessed with revenge he had become. Perhaps there was a way to see Bertolt arrested and have him pay his dues to society; certainly there were cases where criminals had reformed.

That notwithstanding, he wanted nothing more than to see Bertolt dead by his hand.

Stefan deflected the silvery flash of a blade with his spear.

“I see. I’ve underestimated you. And here I was, wondering why you’d wander off on your own like that... To think that you were baiting me.”

Bertolt had again taken up his scimitar. Stefan settled into a stance to prepare to meet his enemy head-on.

“Nii-san... is that true? You want to kill him?”

Franka’s voice shook.

“You can’t! If you do that, you’ll simply be the same as him!”

“And why should I care about that?” Stefan replied, his eyes never leaving Bertolt.

His sister was left speechless.

“I’ve long since been resolved. Even if I must dirty my hands, I will see this deed done. And you? What have you decided for his fate?”

“I... I want him to be put to trial...”

“What court would try him? How would you get him to confess anyway?”

“...”

Franka had no answer.

“You can’t forgive your father’s murder and yet you’re unwilling to dirty your hands. You haven’t even bothered to think up a way to make this man face his crimes. You lack determination as well as resolve. You’re just throwing a tantrum like a spoiled child. ——If that’s how you’re going to be, then just shut your mouth and watch!”

Stefan charged toward his master’s enemy and thrust his spear forward.

(——Shit.)

Bertolt frowned.

He’d barely blocked the first attack. Against Stefan’s relentless flurry of attacks, he found himself being slowly pushed back.

He’d underestimated the man. He’d underrated both Stefan’s resolve and skill.

The owner of the garbage store and the others were no threat. Once he’d killed Stefan, he’d simply dispatch the others to shut their mouths and things would be alright. That had been his plan as he’d begun the fight——However, Stefan was far, far stronger than he’d imagined. Bertolt felt himself sinking into his opponent’s pace.

(If I just had a celestial Dragon Fang weapon as well——)

Bertolt gritted his teeth and focused entirely on defense. Yes, this wasn’t a difference of strength, but merely one of weaponry. It had to be.

No matter the reason, unfortunately, the fact of the matter was that he was at a disadvantage. He needed to find the opportunity to retreat——

“——Stop! Nii-san!” Franka screamed.

“Shut it! Stop getting in my way! Are morals and the law really that important to you?!”

The movements of Stefan's arms hadn't slowed one bit. Bertolt thought to circle around, but the razor point of Stefan's spear cut off his escape.

"Scum like this doesn't deserve the right to a fair trial——"

"That's not it!" Franka retorted. "I don't want you to become a murderer over someone like him, Nii-san!"

"——"

Stefan hesitated for a moment.

Bertolt didn't miss his opportunity. Rather than charging toward his opponent, he instead dashed to the right——

"!"

Where Franka was standing, wide-eyed.

His intent was nothing so tame as merely attempting to secure a hostage. No, he thought to carve out a hole from her stomach, thus restricting Stefan's movements with a threat to her life. That'd give him the opportunity he needed to strike back, or at the very least, escape.

(You are, after all, nothing more than a naïve little brat who can only think of his sister!)

Brother and sister are both morons, Bertolt mocked in his heart as he readied his scimitar. In his mind, he could already envision the feeling of his blade tearing through her tender flesh, and of Stefan's stunned horror. However——

Along with the tinkling crash of metal on metal, his blade was stopped before it reached her body.

"...The way you think is despicable."

The words had come from the garbage shop owner.

“Then again, I, who knew your mind, have no right to say that.”

In that brief instant, Yuuki had drawn the short sword at Franka’s waist and obstructed the path of the scimitar. Franka, finally realizing what had happened, fell to the ground ashen-faced.

Bertolt was, however, a veteran of many battles. Before his shock had even registered, his body had already moved.

He pulled his sword back ever so slightly, and altering its trajectory slightly upward, slashed at Yuuki with blinding speed.

Or rather, he feinted a slash. In a blink, the sword again changed direction.

By subtly manipulating his shoulder, elbow, and wrist, his sword was ever-changing. This was Bertolt’s specialty. Even among rank one adventurers, there had not been a single one who had ever managed to escape this technique the first time they’d witnessed it.

Yuuki failed to react. The blade’s edge sought his throat like a snake.

Once he’d killed this one, then he’d be able to make his escape.

Bertolt rejoiced as he saw blood fountain out upon the ground, blood that surely belonged to his target.

—Instead, a gust of wind had blown by, taking his hand with it. His hand, scimitar still locked in its grip, flew through the air and crashed into the wall before falling to the ground.

“...Huh?”

Bertolt’s expression was one of utter disbelief as he stared at his stump of an arm.

Franka and Stefan were similarly stunned speechless.

“Aaaa...aaaaaaaaaaaaah! M-My arm.... MY ARM! W-W-What did you doooooooooo——?!”

“God, you’re noisy.”

Yuuki irritably grabbed Bertolt by the jaw and slammed him headfirst into the wall. Bertolt’s body slid to the floor disturbingly.

“What did I do? I cut it off, of course. That’s all. It’s just one arm; compared to what you’ve done, this isn’t anything at all.”

Yuuki turned to Stefan.

“I have no interest in this farce of yours. ——Please refrain from getting my party wrapped up in your butchery. It’s a pain in the ass.”

“...Move, you trash shop owner.”

“Is that so?”

Yuuki looked at Franka.

“Uh, um...”

The young cleric girl finally pulled her wits together and rose.

“Thank you, Yuuki-san. ——Nii-san, I apologize, but I refuse to move.”

“...”

“It’s not that I feel pity for him or that I’ve never thought of killing him... I just don’t want you to become like him, Nii-san. If you do that, I feel like we’ll grow even further apart.”

“So you intend to let this scum go free?”

“Well...”

“You just want to forget everything; pretend nothing ever happened. ——I won’t blame you for that, but neither do you have the authority to stop me. Move.”

“——I refuse. It’s my fault for getting the order of things wrong. Before we ever grew apart, I should have asked you what was on your mind.”

“It’s already too late for that. This is already the end. ——Now move, Franka.”

“I——!”

“Um, I have a question.”

At this time, Tina raised her voice as if completely oblivious to the strained atmosphere.

“Stefan, that you are filled with rage and sorrow is to be expected—— It’s just that, why didn’t you ever think to tell Franka how you felt?”

“...”

“You could have raged together and cried together. If these thoughts took hold of your heart upon your master’s death, then could you not have together contemplated the meaning of strength? Of revenge? ——Why did you distance yourself from her?”

Tina’s words were without the slightest hint of reproach. On the contrary, her voice was filled with an unfathomable dignity as if delivering a revelation from on high.

Awed by Tina, Stefan answered.

“I never wanted to... reject her...”

“And yet it is undeniably the truth that you have distanced yourself from her. To be honest, there is not the slightest difference between you and her. Both of you suffered alone and decided to resolve matters on your own. ——Tina is an outsider in this matter, and so she has no desire to condemn

you. However, if you feel guilt over her father's death, was that not all the more reason to hold her close?"

"..."

"You know, Tina thinks there's still time?"

Franka didn't speak, instead quietly waiting for her brother to speak first.

"I, I——"

Stefan raised his voice, wavering with uncertainty, to speak. At that moment, however——

Yuuki noticed *that*.

He had no strength to stand.

(Dammit, dammit, Goddammit——!)

His consciousness hazy, Bertolt swore.

How the hell had this happened? There had to be a mistake somewhere. If he'd lost to Stefan's celestial Dragon Fang weapon, that'd be one thing. But for him to lose so disgracefully to the owner of that garbage shop of all people; to even lose an arm! How could he possibly accept such a thing?

I have to correct this mistake. I want revenge. I need power.

Right, if I just had something like Stefan's celestial Dragon Fang weapon
——

Suddenly, Bertolt noticed a small organism looking up at him.

It looked to be some kind of rodent – a squirrel, almost. It was painfully obvious, however, that this was no ordinary animal.

——Inlaid in its head was an enormous white gem.

“Ohhhhh...!” Bertolt couldn’t help but exclaim.

He knew what this was. This was what his party had glimpsed on the sixtieth floor before being wiped out.

Moreover, he’d seen this white gem before, in the pages of a book.

The squirrel or whatever looked at him with interest, blinking at him questioningly.

“Give me——” Bertolt said. “Give me that power! The Snow-white Dragon Fang Gem!”

“——Grab him!” Yuuki shouted.

It was already too late, however. The small animal disappeared into Bertolt’s chest as if melting into him.

He began to change.

Stefan, sensing the abnormality, immediately thrust his AminsBlue Water Pike in Bertolt’s direction.

His strike, fast as lightning, was easily curtailed.

Bertolt’s right hand, which should have been chopped off by Yuuki, had stopped Stefan’s attack.

“Hahahahahhahahaha. This sure feels great.”

Laughing loudly as he spoke in a voice that was somewhat murky as well as strangely off, he casually waved the arm that had taken hold of Stefan’s spear.

“——!”

Stefan was definitely not small in stature, but he nevertheless flew, eventually smashing into the wall.

In his current state, Bertolt was now as much dragon as he was man.

Looking closely, his naked body was now covered in a layer of bony armor.

“You’re so light. You should eat more, Stefan,” the dragon-man mocked, raising the AmnisBlue Water Pike grasped in his right hand.

“Master, that’s——”

“A Void Dragon,” Yuuki answered unhappily.

“When you say Void Dragon, you mean the Void Beasts that protect the Dragon Fang Gems?”

“More accurately, a Void Dragon is the organic form of a Dragon Fang Gem. It’s not your run-of-the-mill mineral. No, it’s sentient, and wanders to and fro as it wills, testing humanity, looking for a suitable master.”

“T-Then has he been acknowledged as its master?”

“No, they don’t place their trust in others so easily. It’s merely lent him its power for the time being in order to test him.”

It was only after they had submitted to another’s will that they could take on the form of a celestial Dragon Fang Weapon. It was likely that Stefan’s AmnisBlue Water Pike had been subjugated by the Duelist belonging to the “Shinki who Supports the Sky.”

The reverse was also true; if the Dragon Fang Gem failed to accept the one being tested, it would not take on this highest form of Reliquia.

Judging by its current form, where it was fused with Bertolt as opposed to having taken on the shape of a weapon, it seemed it had decided to grant his plea for power out of passing whimsy, leading to the current state of affairs. If that was indeed the case, things were about to take a turn for the worse.

“...Return, AmnisBlue Water Pike.”

Stefan spat blood, coughing as he spoke. Hearing his words, his spear disappeared from Bertolt’s hand and reappeared in his.

“Oh. Celestial Dragon Fang weapons are indeed amazing, although I don’t think I’d lose as I am now.”

As Bertolt finished speaking, he settled into a stance. At that moment——

“Huh? What’s going on here?”

Accompanied by the sound of footsteps, three men appeared: Jahar, who had shouted in surprise, and the two clerics.

The oddity turned toward them and spoke.

“Yo, Jahar.”

Jahar frowned slightly.

“...You’re that loser, Bertolt? You look a little different, don’t you?”

“You know, I’ve always hated you. Though you’re all going to die anyway, you get to be the opening act.”

“...”

Jahar somehow instinctively realized that Bertolt’s threat was serious this time. Not speaking a word, he drew his enormous blade and attacked. However——

“What the...?”

Both the razor-sharpness of his sword’s edge as well as its massive weight were more than excessive when it came to cutting someone. However, his sword simply stopped at Bertolt’s neck; its only result the loud thud of impact. His target was entirely unharmed.

“Heh,” Bertolt sneered. “Die!”

Suddenly, he loosed a vicious roar. Jahar was slammed into the wall with tremendous speed, leaving a crater on impact before falling to the floor. That his body retained its original shape was already nothing less than a miracle; expecting him to move after that was asking too much.

Bertolt had simply struck him with his right fist. His speed and strength had long since surpassed the realm of humans.

“Now who’s next——”

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

The small-statured cleric had given in to his terror, and had unleashed a string of offensive Orisons. Sparks flew as numerous balls of flame scattered.

“Stop that, you fool!” Yuuki yelled.

Alas, it was already too late. Bertolt’s arm ran his body straight through where his heart had been.

The other cleric turned to flee.

“You’re slow.”

With inhuman agility, Bertolt caught up to the man and tore a hole in his body from behind.

Drenched in the blood of his victims, the dragon-man slowly turned.

“It’s as you see. Do you really think you can escape? Come, entertain me.”

“...You guys had better get out of here. His main target is me, after all.”

Stefan raised his spear and strode forward with unsteady steps.

“Nii-san!” Franka wailed.

It was obvious to all watching that he wasn't able to move as he desired. He was walking to his death.

“Master...”

Tina raised her head to look at Yuuki with a gaze full of expectation and pleading.

He knew what she wanted to convey; Franka would not be willing to leave her brother behind.

If that were indeed the case, then he wouldn't have any choice. He sighed.

“...Oh, he can be beaten,” Yuuki said.

The real problem came after that.

Bertolt was intoxicated with the power he now wielded.

Simply swinging his arm was enough to destroy a person. Moreover, he was impervious to both Reliquia and Orisons.

He was, without a doubt, the strongest existence in this world.

There were only four people left: Stefan, Franka, Yuuki, and Tina.

They seemed to be deep in discussion; Bertolt intentionally let them be – for the moment.

Stefan and Yuuki were to be the main dish. To devour them too quickly would such a waste.

Would they run, or would they attack, he wondered.

——As he saw their expressions, he decided it was the latter.

“Let's go!”

With Yuuki's shout as the starting signal, Franka began to unleash her magic.

A meaningless waste of energy, Bertolt thought to himself, smiling. Unexpectedly, however, her target had not been him, but the walls and floor surrounding him. Smoke, dust, and wooden fragments obstructed his vision.

"I see. So you want to hinder my sight?"

Bertolt didn't mind.

If they took this opportunity to run, then he'd simply give chase. It would take but a moment to escape this fog of smoke. If they instead took the opportunity to attack——

"Then let them come."

Right as he spoke, a short sword came stabbing toward him from out of the smoke. Bertolt blocked it with his fist.

The Reliquia in question was only a third or fourth-grade. It must have been the owner of that junk shop.

Because the stream of Orisons had yet to cease, it was as hard to see as ever. It seemed his style of fighting relied on guerilla tactics.

What a waste of energy indeed. It was quite possible that even Stefan's spear would be unable to pierce his thick armor. The unending string of thrusts from that short sword were even less of an irritation than a mosquito bite.

Again, Yuuki appeared before him. He swung his fist; it was dodged. This time he was stabbed in the chest by the short sword; again, he was unharmed.

"What a futile struggle——"

As he spoke, he was attacked once more; he was stabbed twice this time.

Bertolt clicked his tongue. He didn't know where the man had learned how to move like that, but that garbage shop owner's movements were inexplicably nimble and fluid.

That said, it wasn't like he could penetrate the Dragon Fang Gem's armor anyway. His stamina would run out first.

Yuuki appeared once more. His right punch was dodged; he was stabbed twice. His left punch was also dodged; he was attacked three more times. Each blow simply scraped past his skin harmlessly, but each hit also increased his rage. Bertolt reached out to grab him as he retreated only to watch his prey escape once more. In that brief moment of time, he'd been dealt five blows.

"That son of a——!"

Infuriated, Bertolt took a giant stride forward—— Right as Stefan extended his spear.

That garbage shop owner had led him into a trap. This had been their plan from the beginning. However——

"Bahahaha!" Bertolt laughed.

The AmnisBlue Water Pike had indeed pierced his chest, but only just barely. It seemed he had nothing to fear from even a celestial Dragon Fang weapon.

The stream of Orisons stopped and the cloud of smoke cleared, revealing four silhouettes who apparently had not the least intention of escaping.

"Are you guys done? You know that means it's my victory, right?"

"Yep, we're done. Unfortunately—— Well, let's just say that it's *because* we're done, that we win."

Bertolt frowned at his words. Suddenly, he realized something was off.

“What on earth...?”

Wide-eyed and utterly dumbstruck, Bertolt fell to the ground with a thud – now returned to his original form.

The bone armor bestowed upon him by the Dragon Fang Gem was entirely gone. All that remained was a powerless man with a missing arm, unable to even stand.

“I guess you weren’t qualified, after all,” Yuuki muttered as he returned Franka’s short sword to her.

The Dragon Fang Gems were always looking for a suitable master. Bertolt’s intense will and overwhelming bloodlust had piqued the Dragon Fang Gem’s interest.

Is this man worthy of my power?

In the end, the result was that he was not. He’d been a disappointment. He’d failed to utilize the weapon correctly, and rather than drawing out its true potential, had simply relied on its power as a crutch. Not only had he failed to seriously wound Yuuki and the others, he’d even gotten hurt in the process. The man wasn’t even close to worthy.

Bringing about this circumstance had been Yuuki’s goal from the beginning. It wasn’t necessary to defeat Bertolt head-on; all that was needed was to separate the two. In this manner, they were able to resolve the issue in a completely unexpected manner. Unfortunately, that didn’t mean they were problem-free.

“Right then. The big room’s next; let’s go!”

Yuuki reminded them of the next step of the plan decided on beforehand. Franka supported her brother as they ran.

Having broken the fusion, the Dragon Fang Gem was returning to its original form.

In the space of roughly three seconds, it had regained its true shape – that of an enormous, snow-white dragon.

“Ah...AHHHH!”

Bertolt struggled along the ground to escape. His cries soon ceased however, concurrent with the sound of an earth-shaking footstep.

“...Uwa, it’s so big.”

“That’s the original form of the Snow-white Void Dragon. Stop wasting your time admiring it and run faster. Unless you want to be its next victim?”

“Leave it to me! ——Fall!”

In accordance with her shout, the Void Dragon’s legs began to sink. Although it had only been a few meters’ worth, it was still enough to halt its advance. It wasn’t anything near enough to stop it, but they’d gained precious moments.

The Void Dragon howled in anger. Heeding its roar, the other Void Beasts in the region, having hidden out of fear, appeared one by one.

“——This is bad. Faster!”

Yuuki and Tina raced along, following closely behind Franka and her brother.

Tina lacked the necessary divine energy to teleport their whole party. Instead, she employed her rapidly depleting supply of divine energy to slow the monster down as they sought another means of escape.

Indeed, this floor housed a method to return to the surface. They could simply ignore the Void Beasts and the Void Dragon and return.

“I can feel the energy from the teleporter. ——Over there!”

Tina raced into the large room and then to one of its corners.

“Is... *pant*... Is there something... *pant*... there?” Franka asked in between gasps for air.

“It’s the other half of the teleporter. Look, that stone monument.”

“...We looked there already; there’s nothing there.”

“Activating it has certain requirements. ——Tina, if you would be so kind.”

“Got it. First it has to be activated, and then I’ll set it to teleport everyone on this floor to the third floor.”

As Tina finished speaking, Yuuki felt a sense of foreboding.

What? Just what was it that was nagging him?

The answer came to him in a flash of inspiration. This teleporter ought to be dormant, and yet Tina had said just a moment ago that she could ‘feel its energy.’ In other words——

“...How could this happen?” Tina murmured.

“What’s wrong? Don’t tell me you can’t activate it?”

Franka’s face revealed her anxiety.

“No. It can still teleport, it’s just that—— The process has already begun, and moreover, its settings have been determined already.”

It was as he’d feared. He fought to keep his cool as he raised his voice.

“Asking you why would be pointless, so instead, let me ask: what will happen now?”

“Its settings have already been configured. The destination is the third floor. The targets: everyone on this floor... as well as all Void Beasts.”

“...”

As the implications of those words passed through his mind, a chill ran down his spine.

Their party – alongside the horde of high-ranked Void Beasts and the Void Dragon – would all be returned to the third floor. In other words, their destination would put them within reach of the city – and surrounded by new, inexperienced adventurers.

“...It’ll be a slaughter,” Franka said, horrified.

As she spoke, the Void Beasts reached the room. Furthermore, the sound of the Void Dragon’s footsteps, each of which made the very ground tremble, grew ever nearer.

“Tina, can you either deactivate the teleporter, or reconfigure it?”

“There’s no time——”

In the next moment, the scenery around them began to distort, and the room filled with a burst of brilliant light.

Chapter 5: Just to Protect



His vision quickly cleared.

“——Whoa.”

After a couple steps, Yuuki regained his balance.

He gripped one of light fixtures on the wall to steady himself. This was definitely the third floor.

From what he could see of things, he placed himself just in front of the stairway up to the next floor, and close by the teleporter.

Before him was a young boy staring at him in wide-eyed shock.

“Er, wha? Yuuki-sensei...? From where... you...?”

“Get out of the way!”

Yuuki threw himself to the floor, grabbing the boy to his chest as he did so. An enormous snake’s head snapped at the spot the boy’s head had been a moment prior.

If he’d been even a second later, the boy would even now be missing his entire upper body.

“W-what’s going on...?” the boy wailed, looking down the road in fear.

He was looking at an enormous snake with many heads, its body as thick as a tree trunk, slowly slithering over. It didn’t really need to be said that this was no native inhabitant of the third floor.

“Edgar, why are you here?” Yuuki asked the beginning trainee student calmly, making sure to never take his eyes off the enemy.

“Uh, well, today we came to visit the labyrinth, and... um, I saw the stairs for the third floor, and thought I’d come take a look... by myself...”

“So everyone else is still above us, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Head back to the second floor, gather everyone, and get out of here. Find the knights guarding the entrance and tell them Void Beasts are here in number. ——Now go, on the double!”

Edgar ran.

“...Now then, what should I do next?” Yuuki muttered to himself as he studied the large snake.

Raising a disturbance here would draw the attention of the surface. The Oath Legions and even the Duelists would be sure to act. Things were far from irreparable. The problem was... how many sacrifices would there be before things finally came to an end?

If he were to make a simple calculation of costs vs. benefits, then the obvious decision would be to make a break for the surface. Nevertheless, he hesitated.

“——Oh, over there! Master!”

A familiar voice called out from behind him, interrupting his train of thought.

Yuuki turned to look and instantly regretted his actions. Tina was running excitedly toward him – with three energetic Void Beasts in tow. They looked like enormous bulls, except that——

“Uwa! Hyaaaa!”

Tina screamed as she was thrown into the air.

——Bulls didn’t normally breathe fire. Well, they *were* Void Beasts, after all.

As the petite young girl fell back down, she was hit by the horn of one of the beasts and tossed back into the air.

Yuuki rushed over to where she was falling and caught her.

“Oooh, nice catch!”

“...You know it’s impossible to escape them on foot, right?”

“I saw a party under attack, so I attracted their attention. Tina has the ScutumHoly Shield, so she makes excellent bait!”

It was definitely true that she hadn’t suffered any injuries despite having been attacked countless times.

“...”

Bait, was it?

Helping others was a matter of course to her. She’d do so without a moment’s hesitation. Without a single thought toward what would be gained and at what price it would come.

——Dammit. This feeling, what was it?

“Now then, given the circumstances, the Shinki have to take action... Er, huh?”

Yuuki took Tina in his arms and ran straight forward. The fiery bulls, their prey poached right before their eyes, roared as they angrily gave chase.

“M-Master! There’s more in front! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah——!”

Yuuki paid no heed to the wails coming from the girl in his bosom as he increased his speed.

The many-headed serpent targeted the prey which, for some unknown reason, had decided to run straight at it, and charged toward it.

Its enormous mouth, boasting two venomous, razor-sharp fangs, closed the gap in an instant. Right as it was about to bite him, Yuuki leapt to the side.

Jumping off the wall, he passed through the extremely narrow gap left by the serpent.

The fire-breathing bulls, chasing at full speed, as well as the serpent which flew past him, failed to take notice of his movements.

With a tremendous crash, they collided into a close-quarters frenzy.

The sound behind him growing ever fainter, Yuuki ran toward safety.

“What amazing dexterity! You’re too cool, Master!”

“...Thanks. Anyway, let’s check out the situation at the teleporter itself.”

Yuuki confirmed that he’d left the Void Beasts far behind before slowing.

The vast majority of Void Beasts weren’t only hostile toward humans. When large Void Beasts such as those collided, a vicious battle would break out.

The two made their way to the stairs to the second floor.

Many people had witnessed the enormous Void Beasts, and were even now making a mad scramble for the stairs. Edgar and the others seemed to have already escaped.

“——Oh, that reminds me: after we and the Void Beasts were teleported, it seems we were all split up?”

“About that, well, it seems to be a built-in precaution. In order to ensure that objects don’t materialize into one another, the teleported bodies seem to be divided up when they’re reformed. That way you won’t end up in a wall or something. That said, I’m not entirely sure on the details,” Tina answered from her spot on Yuuki’s shoulders.

“Because there were so many targets to be teleported this time, the range of dispersal was quite large.”

In other words, Franka and Stefan were around here somewhere.

Continuing on to the stairs, they finally arrived at the stele that was the teleportation device, now covered by a large piece of cloth. It looked to be there to prevent people from coming into contact with the device. Strangely, there weren't any Void Beasts or people standing guard in the vicinity.

Tina climbed down from Yuuki's shoulders, and lifting up the piece of cloth, patted the stone to survey it.

"How is it? Is it possible to send just the Void Beasts back to the 64th floor?"

"Sorry, no can do. Although it's still activated and the flow of divine energy is still going, it seems like this device can only receive, and not transmit."

"So it really is a one-way trip. Guess it's going to have to come down to humans taking them down after all."

"Our first priority is the survivors. I'm worried about Franka and the others."

"Right."

Yuuki sighed.

"——Ok, let's get things sorted out before we take action. First up, Tina, I want you to consume the device."

"Eh...?"

Tina blinked, seemingly confused by his command.

"What use is a Shinki without any divine energy? If the teleporter has divine energy flowing through it still, then it's the same as a Reliquia, is it not?"

"Ohhhh... You know, you're right! You're so smart, Master!"

As the Shinki laid her hands atop its form, the stele turned into particles of light and faded.

"Hmm, it'd spent a lot of its energy on teleportation, but I should still be able to do some stuff. I feel positively full of power! Now what's next,

Master?”

“Can you trace the flows of divine energy throughout the floor?”

Yuuki picked up the cloth that had covered the teleporter and rent it in two.

“If you’re asking whether I can, then I can, but... what am I looking for? Adventurers carrying Reliquia, the light fixtures on the walls – Tina counts numberless sources of divine energy. Don’t tell me you want to take this opportunity to collect all those things for money——”

“Don’t be stupid. Well, it’s not like I wouldn’t, given the chance. ——No, what we’re looking for are massive batteries of divine energy. There ought to be two sources of overwhelming energy.”

“Hmm...”

Tina closed her eyes and began to focus.

“Y-You’re right. Ah. One is Stefan’s celestial Dragon Fang weapon. The other——”

“The Snow-white Void Dragon. That’s the distinctive signature of a Dragon Fang Gem, after all.”

Yuuki handed one piece of the torn fabric to Tina. It was large enough to wrap her body in.

“First, find Franka. It’s more than likely that the Snow-white Void Dragon is beyond the abilities of the Oath Legions to handle, so we’ll need to figure out a way to deal with it. We can’t allow it to go up any farther than this.”

This feeling was terribly nostalgic; he’d thought he’d long since forgotten such things.

He felt completely at peace. Franka and the others, his students, and the unable – this was all just to protect them.

Please forgive me, he whispered to the one who had taught him how to live a normal life, and who at the very end, had freed him. “Her.”

——Just this once, I must again be who I once was.

Bertolt gritted his teeth and leaning against the wall for support, slowly advanced.

Though he’d just barely managed to avoid being crushed to death, his right leg had been stepped on and shattered. If he gave up on the Dragon Fang Gem now, he not only wouldn’t have a weapon left, but he’d have to forego his right arm as well.

“Shit! Ithurtsithurtsithurtsithurtsithurtsgoddammitjustdiediediediedie...”

Bertolt cursed endlessly as he slowly made his way forward. The current situation did not allow for him to simply leisurely await rescue.

Dangerous Void Beasts were everywhere.

Just a moment ago, he’d been on the 64th floor. He was certain of that.

And now he was on one of the uppermost levels. A quick glance told him he was more than likely on the third floor. He didn’t know why, but something had apparently teleported him and all the Void Beasts here.

There’s no way I’m going to die here, Bertolt vowed to himself.

There was still money to earn, food to eat, wine to drink, and women to hold.

Right, he was one of this city’s precious few elite. Like hell he’d die in a place like this.

Encouraging himself to press on, he continued around the corner bend – only to come face-to-face with an enormous centipede.

It was, of course, another of the Void Beasts from the 64th floor. It was roughly three meters long.

“AH——”

Bertolt tried to retreat, only to trip and fall on his rear.

The centipede confirmed its target. Lifting its huge body into the air, it came crashing down. Bertolt struggled with all his might, but the centipede’s innumerable legs held him bound.

“AAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

As its venomous mandibles drew ever nearer, Bertolt loosed a horrible scream—— Suddenly, their surroundings were hit with a deep chill.

The centipede’s main body was frozen solid, its movement stopped. The force it had exerted with its legs had ceased.

“Hurry up!” a female voice cried.

By the time she finished her words, Bertolt had already scrambled away.

The Void Beast suddenly burst into flame and swiftly turned to charcoal.

“Are you alright?——”

His savior approached three steps, and then suddenly stopped talking as she stared at him.

“Yeah, thanks. You’re a cleric? If you could, would you mind healing...”

Bertolt was struck by a sudden realization. The light from the fixtures on the wall had illuminated her face – it was her.

His heart twisted within him.

He was unarmed and defenseless and, caught on his rear as he was, a literal sitting duck. Moreover, the girl was but a mere ten steps away from him,

watching him.

She could burn him alive, break his neck, cut off his limbs... At this range, Orisons made any of those things a mere triviality.

“Ah, um, your name was Franka?”

“...”

“W-Why don’t you calm down, and we’ll talk? L-Look, I-I’m hurt.”

“...Shut your mouth.”

“I, I regret my actions! I just got a bit overexcited, that’s all! Right! You wanted me to stand trial, right? I-I promise I’ll turn myself in the second we get out——”

“I TOLD YOU TO SHUT YOUR MOUTH!”

Bertolt fell silent.

Franka ground her teeth and glared murderously at Bertolt before finally lifting her head——

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

She wailed as if weeping, as if to give release the emotions that raged within her.

After a moment had passed, she again spoke.

“...Your wounds?”

“Eh, huh?”

“I asked where you were wounded. Where are you hurt?”

“M-my arm and my leg.”

Franka took out a Divine Pearl and strode toward him. He panicked for a moment but she simply healed his wounds as normal.

“...I’ve stopped the bleeding and cut off the pain. This is just emergency first-aid, but you ought to be able to move now. Please head to the stairs and escape.”

“Uhhhh, c-could you lend me your shoulder? I can’t feel my leg; I can’t stand. I’m unarmed too, so I can’t defend myself against the Void Beasts; I’ll die. If that happened, then all you’ve done here would be a waste, am I right?”

“...”

“Just as far as the stairs. Please, I’m begging you.”

He bowed at the waist and clasped his arms, pleading exaggeratedly. He knew his current situation was an advantageous one, but to travel alone was simply too dangerous. Unacceptable, really.

Franka didn’t speak. Finally, she sighed.

“...I understand it. Here, hold on tight.”

“Eh? Er, sorry for the trouble.”

Even if he’d been the one to ask, he couldn’t believe his ears – was she stupid or something? Had she seriously forgotten that he’d been about to kill her down below? With the two of them positioned as they were, it would be a simple matter for him to snap her neck with his left arm. She was too defenseless.

——*No, better hold that thought. Escape’s the first priority.*

He’d better wait until his survival was ensured before settling things with this girl.

The two walked in silence.

The light fixtures had all been wrecked, and so the path was dark. Judging by the fact that they hadn't seen anyone else around, it seemed the other adventurers had safely made it out. Before long, they arrived at an intersection.

“...Hold up,” Franka said.

Bertolt had noticed as well. Something lurked around the corner.

The noises it made, the sound of its footsteps, its presence – all these things bore witness that it wasn't human, but rather a Void Beast. Perhaps a large one.

Can this girl's Orisons really deal with something like that? Bertolt flashed the girl a quick glance out of the corner of his eye.

The girl wasn't weak by any means, but if she failed to kill the beast in a single blow, he'd be the one to suffer the consequences. Perhaps it was best he left her here as bait while he made a run for it. With any luck, the Void Beast would be hungry too; that'd give him some extra time.

“...I'll stall for time. You should go.”

Franka drew her short sword.

Bertolt couldn't believe his ears; surely he'd misheard? How could such a person possibly exist?

“You can't fight right? Then this is the only way.”

“A-Are you sure?”

“I already said there was no other way!” Franka half-sobbed, half-shrieked.

“I can't forgive you, but if I just let you die here, then what right would I have to talk to Nii-san as I have? ——Leave. I hope you keep your promise to turn yourself in.”

Keep his promise? What was she, stupid? Although Bertolt was just about to scorn her foolishness, he found himself hesitating.

For as long as he could remember, Bertolt had always been alone. He'd eaten dirt in back alleys because it'd meant survival. In this bleak world of gray, his existence was the only one of importance. To protect himself, he would do – and had done – *anything*. That was simply the way of things – a truth he'd never once doubted.

But this Franka girl was different. She'd grown up in a world of many brilliant colors, under the care of many who loved her. This much he understood. The worlds seen through their eyes were simply different.

Suddenly, he felt a strange pain in his heart, a deep unease. Could he perhaps have committed sins that simply could not be forgiven? ——This feeling of doubt and fear snared his heart in a vice-like grip.

“What’re you doing?! GO!”

As Franka urged him on once more, Bertolt finally began to move——

“Guaaaaa!”

A terrible death cry sounded followed by the maddened thrashing of an enormous object.

As the two stood rooted to the spot, the blob of flesh, having already lost its shape, shuddered and dropped to the ground.

“Nii-san...”

Catching sight of the newly appearing figure, Franka finally relaxed. It was Stefan, holding his spear.

Stefan watched the two expressionlessly.

Bertolt felt his body tense up before coming to the realization that Stefan would not need to approach him if he meant him ill. Feelings of shame and humiliation ran through him.

“——You’re in the way. Hurry up and leave.”

“A-And you, Nii-san?”

“I’ll be helping adventurers escape, as well as suppressing any rampant Void Beasts. This is the duty of the Oath Legions.”

“But you’re hurt! And alone! You’re being too reckless; I’ll go with you!”

“You’d only be a hindrance.”

Stefan’s response was frigid.

“You’ve already used up your supply of Divine Pearls, correct? Your bag looks empty.”

Bertolt stared at Franka in shock.

Indeed, the bag at her waist appeared empty, shrunken as it was, and swaying as if weightless.

“You... Did you really use your last Divine Pearl to heal me?”

Moreover, she’d thought to stall the Void Beast without any Divine Pearls to do so with?

All to give her father’s murderer a chance to escape?

Her silence was all the answer he needed.

——Just how naïve could a person possibly be? Bertolt wasn’t someone who understood the meaning of gratitude. For her to act in this way was just asking to be exploited; did she really not understand such a simple thing?

This girl wouldn’t live long. No way, no how.

“You should try and meet up with the owner of that junk shop. Even with you getting in the way, he’ll protect you.”

“But, Nii-san——”

Franka tried to rebut him when suddenly Stefan's eyes opened wide in surprise.

“Behind you! Get down!”

Franka's mouth gaped open wordlessly as she froze.

Bertolt moved first. This was the practiced motion of a reflex instilled through countless hours of training and numerous life-and-death battles – a skill which could be honed only through experience.

——*I don't want to die.*

That thought flashed through his mind.

——*I don't care what happens, or who I have to sacrifice – I don't want to die.*

Or so he had always thought, but now...

Reaching out with his only remaining arm, he pushed the girl at his side out of harm's way, with all the strength he had left in him.

At long last, he understood. *So that's why... You know, I rather like this feeling.*

The last scene to pass before his eyes in mortality was awash with vivid color.

“——Ow!”

Franka crashed into the floor, having been shoved with great force.

A moment later, a gust of wind blew by her followed by a sound reminiscent of a large canteen of water being punctured. Bertolt was gone.

To be precise, he hadn't exactly *disappeared* per se. Rather, attacked by the tail of a gigantic Void Beast, his body had been tossed into the air. It carved out a long arc before slamming into the floor and bouncing three times – with accompanying crunches – before coming to a halt, unmoving.

Had he intended to push Franka in the way of the monster, as bait, while he alone escaped? ——Or had he, perhaps, intended to save her? Whichever was the case, it was too late to worry about such things now.

“M-May his name be written in the Book of Life——”

Franka raised her upper body and unconsciously whispered a prayer. A wrathful roar shook the room.

“On your feet! Get up, and get out of here!”

“Ah...”

Along with an earsplitting burst of violent wind, an enormous claw came rushing down toward her head before being deflected off-course by Stefan's spear.

“——Return, AmnisBlue Water Pike.”

The spear, embedded in the wall, disappeared and reappeared in Stefan's hand.

Before the pair stood a gargantuan dragon.

It stood at least ten meters tall, and the aura which radiated from every inch of its body! This was anything but an ordinary Void Beast.

Its colossal body was covered in scales of a pure-white of ethereal beauty. It appeared to have acknowledged its prey's desire to resist; its body shook in displeasure as it approached.

Stefan silently gripped his spear even tighter.

The focus of Stefan's dark emotions for so long now had simply disappeared.

Bertolt'd been killed by the Snow-white Void Dragon now before him.

Although he didn't have the luxury of a leisurely examination of the monster before him as he'd had in the lower levels, standing before it now, face-to-face, he was struck by its overwhelming presence.

"I'll stall for time; get out of here!" Stefan yelled behind him.

A voice from behind conveyed protest.

"Please don't make my resolve go to waste."

This time the voice fell silent. He felt her run off into the distance. *Good.*

Stefan felt an immeasurable calm settle over him.

He'd hated Bertolt to the very depth of his soul. However, it seemed that that hate hadn't been the true origin of the feelings which had held him bound for so long.

No, it was resentment. Resentment against his own powerlessness which had rendered him unable to protect those most dear to him.

It had been to free himself from that feeling that he'd fought until now.

——He thanked the Shinki for this second chance.

Stefan strode forward, and exhaling sharply, brandished the AmnisBlue Water Pike. His intended target: the Void Dragon's legs. He needed to halt its advance.

The spear flashed, but failed to penetrate the beast's scales. With a clank, it bounced harmlessly off.

"ScutumHoly Shield, huh..."

Stefan recognized what had happened. Although he'd been able to at least give Bertolt a minor injury, but his attack just now had left no mark whatsoever. Was that because the AmnisBlue Water Pike was simply unequal to the task, or was it because he was simply lacking as its master?

The Void Dragon lowered its head, its eyes revealing its unnatural intelligence with an irreverent look.

“...You think you've found a new toy to play with, don't you, monster?!” Stefan spat, taking up his weapon anew.

Just as he did so however, he found himself flung into the air.

It was only after the fact that he realized that he'd been kicked. The speed of its movements were more or less indiscernible to the naked eye.

“Guha...!”

Groaning, Stefan forced himself to his feet.

The dragon's enormous mouth gaped wide. Within its gullet, he could see a brilliant white light begin to gather.

“...I guess this is as far as I go,” he murmured.

Franka ran – not in escape, but to seek help.

(Please, Yuuki-san – save Nii-san!)

The face that appeared in her mind then was Yuuki's, which, though eternally lacking in motivation, was ever so reliable.

She hadn't gone far, however, when she was forced off her feet by an enormous explosion.

Her vision turned white as she was assaulted by a howling, glacial squall.

Tossed back and forth against the walls and floor by the gusting winds, she eventually came to a stop.

Franka raised her head, coughing. A loud buzz echoed in her ears and her consciousness was hazy.

——But she could still move.

Franka drew out the very last strength remaining in her body, and managed to rise to her feet.

Her vision, which had been simply a cloud of white until just now, slowly began to return.

The walls had been utterly wrecked, and the shape of the road was now completely changed.

“Breath”: the breath of a Void Dragon was an attack far surpassing anything an offensive Orison might accomplish.

“No... Nii-san...”

Simply the fallout from the attack had already been sufficient to cause damage of this scale. Then her brother, who had bore the brunt of the attack

Franka felt her knees give way. Just as she was about to give in to the despair threatening to paralyze her body...

“...Fufufu. Like the huffing and puffing of an overgrown lizard could possibly harm a Shinki.”

“Stop bragging; it was closer than you’d like to admit.”

As the white haze cleared, the silhouettes of two unknown figures stood between herself and the dragon.

The two were dressed in long robes – or rather, long pieces of fabric – and thus their faces went unseen and their identities unknown. Nevertheless,

from their general size, one appeared to be an adult and the other a child.

Resting atop the shoulder of the slightly larger figure was... her brother?

“Whatever. I still saved him, didn’t I? I did a pretty good job there, so don’t feel obligated to hold back on the praise.”

“I’ll save that for once this is all over, thank you very much.”

Had they perhaps blocked the attack with a defensive shield?

That was impossible. It didn’t matter how skilled or talented the cleric might be, it was impossible to defend against such unearthly power. If it had truly been done... then the caster could not have been human.

No, wait—— That child... what was it she said just now? A Shinki? No way...

“...A Shinki... and her Duelist...”

Her childhood.

Her oft-bedridden mother had a certain habit. Lying in bed, she’d gather Franka and Stefan, whom’d often come to visit, at the foot of her bed and tell them stories.

Her brother loved the stirring tales of the Duelists’ heroics.

At first, these stories had held no draw for young Franka. She tolerated storytime only because it meant she had that much longer to spend with her beloved brother whom came only infrequently.

Gradually though, she too, came to love these enthralling accounts of derring-do.

As adventurers in the labyrinth found themselves in times of deep crisis, they would surely and inevitably appear – those heroes of old.

Ah... It’s all going to be fine now...

——That was the last thought that passed through Franka's mind as she faded into unconsciousness.

The two's pulses slowly settled. She'd only fainted.

Yuuki sighed in relief. It was finally time to settle things.

"There's no time to waste, Master; I don't have much divine energy left. I can only stop a few more attacks."

She lacked the energy to either bind or teleport away the Void Dragon.

For that reason, it'd been decided that she'd devote what little remained to defense. Throwing up a defensive barrier that could completely nullify their opponent's attacks could only be done a few more times before she'd be at her limit.

"I'll take care of it. By the way——"

Yuuki eyed the gargantuan white body standing before them.

"Can you feel that thing's divine energy?"

"Of course. At this distance, I can even feel the pulsing of its energy."

"Where is it concentrated the most heavily?"

"In its neck. Why do you ask?"

"The origin of its strength is also its greatest weakness. ——Alright. Let's get started," Yuuki called out, as he charged toward their foe. "You've been far too brash rampaging around this floor as you have, Snow-white Void Dragon. If you understand the need to reflect on your actions, then let me defeat you, alright?"

The Void Dragon responded with a hostile roar.

“I knew that’s what you’d say. Although I’ve definitely gotten more than a little rusty, but there happens to be a pretty fantastic weapon conveniently available. Let me borrow it for a bit——” Yuuki muttered as he twirled a pike. In his hands was gripped Stefan’s spear – the AmnisBlue Water Pike.

“Let’s begin,” Yuuki said to the spear, smiling faintly. “Hey, don’t be mad. Just lend me a little of your strength, alright? A second-stage transformation should be plenty. ——If we don’t send Whitey over there packing, then your master’s going to die without ever having attained his potential, you know?”

The pike trembled reluctantly before gradually changing its shape.

Just then, the Void Dragon rushed forward and swiped with its front leg. The AmnisBlue Water Pike flashed and blood spurted as the dragon howled in pain; its toe had been severed.



“From this point forward, it’s not enough to simply rely on your ScutumHoly Shield. We’ll decide this with our full strength.”

The pike in his hand had already completely transformed. Its unadorned, inorganic appearance had since grown to twice its former size and taken on a curved, almost living form.

The celestial Dragon Fang weapons came in many shapes and sizes, though they all shared one trait: the existence of three stages of transformation. The first stage already stood beyond human ability to replicate, though it was only from the second stage on that divine energy began to envelop the weapon, granting it the ability to pierce through the ScutumHoly Shield. It went without saying that this raised its destructive potential immeasurably.

The Snow-white Void Dragon glared at Yuuki with hate. It had started to take things seriously.

“Now then, let the true battle begin.”

The dragon’s arsenal included its claws, its fangs, its tail, and its Breath.

The path here was wide enough for it to move freely while the scattered rubble restricted Yuuki’s movement. The setting gave the dragon the decided advantage.

That being the case, Yuuki felt no need to seek after victory. His goal was merely to gain time enough for Tina and the others to flee.

“Hey, over here!”

Yuuki dashed over to its side and unleashed a flurry of blows on its left rear leg. The Void Beast howled in anger, and counterattacked with its fangs and claws, pulling back slightly each time it did so. This repeated itself a few times; Yuuki had succeeded in drawing it back.

Drawing it away by tempting it with his own body was extremely dangerous, but it was worth it. The necessity of doing so in this battle would prove itself. After some time, he’d managed to pull it a good distance away from the wounded pair.

This should be far enough.

His plan shifted into its next phase: it was time to go on the offensive.

Yuuki leapt forward and stabbed the Void Dragon in the thigh. Crimson blood dyed its white scales as it shrieked in pain.

If he'd been fighting as he had been before, now would be the time for retreat. This time, however, he instead stepped in yet further.

‘The next attack depends on how it counters——’

A gigantic claw lifted into the air. Yuuki, watching the Void Dragon's breathing, readied his weapon.

Suddenly, the dragon's foreleg bent, and it whirled a half-revolution with terrible speed.

A ferocious tail sweep.

“——!”

He and his opponent seemed to be pulling from the same playbook: they'd both fainted and waited for the opportunity to counterattack.

Due to the suddenness of the unexpected attack, Yuuki couldn't react in time. Would he be able to dodge it——?

The dragon's tail slammed into an unseen wall, deflecting in another direction. Running into this unforeseen obstacle, the dragon's entire body shook with the impact.

Yuuki seized the opportunity to kick off the ground and circle around to the other side.

“——Are you alright?!” Tina yelled.

She was far closer than the two whom had fainted, having been anxiously watching the engagement the entire time.

“You idiot! Don’t come any closer!” Yuuki screamed.

The dragon, encased in an aura of divine energy as it was, was an existence on an entirely different level from other Void Beasts. Its attacks were more than capable of hurting the Shinki. Without the protection of the ScutumHoly Shield, Tina was nothing more than a frail young girl.

“Who are you calling an idiot! You should be more grateful, you stupid Master!” the Shinki pouted angrily.

“I’m thankful! You really saved my neck there, but you still need to get the hell away from here!”

The dragon’s gaping maw closed in on him. Yuuki vaulted backward, dodging by inches.

“Please, I’m begging you – don’t come any closer! Once... Just once... Would you *please* let me keep you safe?!”

Before he realized he’d even spoken, the words had already left his mouth.

Words that he’d never intended to speak – the honest feelings of his heart.

“...”

Having seemingly drawn something deeper from his words, she finally closed her mouth. Before long, however, she spoke once more.

“I refuse! Don’t insult me! ——You need to understand something, Master. Tina refuses to simply watch as she’s protected. I want to fight at your side!”

The claw came at him once more. Yuuki blocked it with the pike and then raced to Tina’s side.

“I can still open a protective barrier once, no... twice. If you’re willing to leave me in charge of defense, then I’ll do so. However, if you continue to insist that ‘it’s too dangerous’ or whatever, then I’ll do whatever I want. ——Now then, your answer? Which path will lead to victory?”

Tina continued to watch him as she gasped for air.

As he met her eyes, he thought to himself that perhaps he'd been charmed by her.

"... You really are an idiot, aren't you?"

As he absentmindedly considered Tina, her eyebrows raised as she screamed "What did you say?!", he also took in his surroundings. The broken rubble of what had formerly been walls could well serve as a foothold.

Alright. Let's end it.

"...Tina, when I give you the signal, I need you to throw up two defensive screens at once. Aim the first to protect me, and no matter where I may be at the time, place the second exactly one meter from its face. Can you do that for me?"

"Absolutely."

"I'll leave it to you, then."

Yuuki engaged their enemy once more.

First, he'd need to select the correct location, and then alter his combat style to draw it into a dead end.

This would be just like what he'd done earlier. He'd be the bait. He'd intentionally allow himself to be forced up against wall, and then he'd maneuver the opponent into the target location. Even if he succeeded, however, this would leave him with nowhere to run——

"NOW!"

The first barrier appeared. A claw was repulsed. The Void Dragon, having assumed that this would be the attack that sealed its victory roared in anger and impatience. Yuuki ran along the wall, maintaining his distance from the beast.

To a certain degree, he was able to predict its attack patterns. In close-combat, it'd attack with its claws and fangs; at mid-range, it'd use its tail; and finally, at long-range, it'd employ its Breath. Every time it fired its Breath attack, it'd draw its head near to the ground first. This was likely because it was much harder to evade than when compared to an attack from a higher angle.

Because its attack just now had failed, it went on the offensive, unleashing attack after attack without pausing to think.

The Void Dragon lowered its head and opened its mouth.

Just as planned. There was a foothold ahead. If he jumped off it and then kicked off the wall, he'd be able to reach the top of the beast's head.

Here goes——!

Just as Yuuki was about to give Tina the order to throw up the second barrier, the dragon suddenly raised its head and flipped around.

Its Breath was now aimed at Tina and the two lying on the ground.

“——!”

Realizing its intent, Yuuki raced forward at full speed. Alas, he was already too late.

A blinding beam of white light flashed, freezing the air. Amid the cloudy haze left in its wake, he saw three figures tossed about like leaves in the wind, thrust alternately into the walls and floor.

Just as he was about to sink into the depths of despair, his feet stopped moving.

The fact that he could see them meant that Tina had noticed the dragon's movements and thrown up a barrier in time. Had they been hit directly, there would be nothing left for him to see.

The problem was, given her dwindling supply of energy, it wouldn't last long. What should he do?

Only one thing came to mind. As he turned to face his enemy once more, he realized – it was staring at him as well. He felt a chill run down his spine, and not from the cold.

“Aw, crap——”

He had been its target from the very beginning.

It had long since realized that his battle on two fronts – against itself and to protect the wounded – was highly disadvantageous. If it focused its attacks on the wounded, his focus would wander off the fight in front of him.

Even as he dodged its razor-sharp fangs, that attack was followed immediately by the swiping of its talons. Though Yuuki managed to jump under them, his movement was curtailed. His back was now pressed against the cold, stone walls.

The Void Dragon watched him scornfully.

At what was now point-blank range, its maw gaped wide. He could clearly see the white light gathering deep within its gullet.

——It was far too late to even dream of avoiding it.

“Ugh...”

Franka awoke from the shock of being thrown into the floor.

For a brief moment, she thought she'd been called back to the side of the Heavenly King, but then she realized that the familiar scenery surrounding her was that of the labyrinth. It seemed she was still alive.

Ten meters ahead lay a cold corpse. As the thought crossed her mind that it might be her brother's body, her blood ran cold. Just as quickly, however,

she realized that it wasn't her brother; no, it was Bertolt, whom had been beaten to death by the Void Dragon.

Looking ahead, she caught sight of the stranger who had saved her life.

His skill with the spear and martial ability were incredible, but what more amazing still was how he had not only engaged the Void Dragon in single combat, but had scarred it with numerous wounds. Unfortunately, he'd finally been caught at a disadvantage. Faced with an unending flurry of attacks from the dragons talons and fangs, he'd been forced into a desperate situation.

He needs my help. —That thought brought with it the realization that she'd run out of Divine Pearls.

How could this happen?

Was there really nothing she could do? Was there not some other way——

“That guy's waist pouch! Open it!”

From beneath a crumbling slab of rock by her side, a terribly familiar female voice called out.

‘That guy’ – was she possibly referring to Bertolt? His waist... what?

Franka struggled to rise and looked over. There was a pouch at his waist which had sprung a hole. Through the hole she could see light stones, flint, and other small tools. Actually, something else was there too——

“A Divine Pearl?”

Moreover, an extremely high-quality one; perhaps even a grade-one.

He was a warrior, so why would he be carrying something like that? She shook her head; there was no time to ponder the matter.

She tried to rush over, but her feet weren't taking orders, and she tripped instead. Her body was completely drained.

Just as she was falling, however, a shadow flew over and grabbed the object.

“Nii-san——!”

Stefan silently tossed the Divine Pearl over to her. Catching it, she turned back to the scene of the engagement.

I have to help him! The person fighting needed her help.

Releasing the entire store of divine energy held within the Divine Pearl in one go, she shouted, “Barrier! Please keep him safe!”

He’d had several bits of good fortune.

The first was that the Divine Pearl he’d hidden on Bertolt’s person was still there.

The second was that it was Franka who’d taken hold of it, and not Tina.

The efficiency with which the Shinki performed their miracles and with which humans performed Orisons was incomparable. However, the nature of the Shinki’s powers necessitated that the divine energy hidden within Reliquia first be broken down and absorbed into their bodies before it could be used. Human clerics, however were different. Divine Pearls could directly utilize their divine energy as willed by the human in control.

And so, in this particular circumstance, Franka had been much faster than Tina would have been; that was to say, fast enough.

Forming in between Yuuki and the dragon, a meter away from each, the defensive barrier appeared just as the dragon’s Breath fired.

Although Franka had consumed the entirety of the Divine Pearl’s energy store, it nearly wasn’t enough to nullify a dragon’s Breath; it had simply bought a couple seconds. The barrier quickly warped, shattered, and disappeared.

——Those couple seconds had, however, been enough.

Given the immediate proximity of the blast, the Void Dragon's breath had been blown back to encase its owner in a swirling eddy of frost. Such an attack was, of course, incapable of harming the beast.

That notwithstanding, the absolute chill it carried within it had also frozen the moisture in the air, filling the surroundings with a frosty white haze, obscuring the Void Dragon's vision. In that brief instant, it lost sight of Yuuki.

“Over here!”

Yuuki had taken the opportunity to leap off the wall behind it, going clear over its back and onto its neck.

The dragon howled in fury and lifted its head angrily. Yuuki, following the motion, leapt into the air.

He confirmed his target, located about a quarter of the way down its five-meter long neck.

“And with this, it's over.”

With gravity adding to the force of his thrust, he speared the AmnisBlue Water Pike straight through the targeted point with terrific precision.

The Dragon Fang Gem – the source of the Void Dragon's power – flew out from its massive body, clinking as it hit the floor.

“The AmnisBlue Water Pike symbolizes flowing water. It's only right that it should cut through the snow,” Yuuki murmured as he leapt down and picked up the gem.

Guaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa——

The Snow-white Void Dragon's head flailed wildly as it wailed its death cries.

Before long, its movements had ceased entirely and it crumbled to ash.

Franka and Stefan sat beside one another on the ground, staring numbly.

The mysterious personage who had just laid waste to a Void Dragon slowly turned to face them before tossing the object in his hands over. The second the spear pierced through the wall above Stefan's head, it lost its strange, curved form and returned to normal.

"Who *are* you...?"

Ignoring Franka's question, the stranger grabbed the other mysterious figure, the child, and ran off.

Just then, the rescue party arrived.

Epilogue

† 1 †

“Here, Yuuki and Tina-chan’s share.”

Alfred was visiting the store. With those words, he handed over some silver coins.

“...Our ‘share’?”

Yuuki blinked uncertainly.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand?”

“It’s for the dragon incident. You were the one who informed the authorities and led the way right? You also helped with the cleanup, so the Church is rewarding your actions. Although I wasn’t able to offer the least bit of assistance, but as the party leader, it’s the least I could do to request some remuneration. I’m sorry to say that this amount of money is little consolation in the face of what you had to suffer, though.”

“Well, it’s at least enough to enjoy some good food, right?”

“Ohhh, that sounds nice. Food is indeed the best use for it! Tina wants to eat something yummy!”

The two girls had already made the full return to normalcy.

“This isn’t even enough to cover our medical costs,” Yuuki bemoaned.

“I also dropped by to invite you guys out to eat. My treat,” Alfred said with a wry smile. “You two only entered the labyrinth at my request, after all.”

“If you’re going to say that, Master, then it’s really my fault——”

“Neither of you are to blame for this. I decided on my own to stick my nose into this business, so I’m just reaping what I sowed. —That said, I think I’m going to take a break from raiding for a bit; I’m exhausted.”

That was only half-true. Although he was indeed physically weary, his mental fatigue was much greater.

He didn’t dare count how many Reliquia they’d wasted during this outing. And all he had to show for it was the handful of coins he’d been handed earlier. They were deeply, inexorably, in the red. If Boris were still around, he wouldn’t be able to complain even if the old man killed him.

Franka’s father’s Reliquia, the first-grade Divine Pearl, had also been used up. Although it had been Franka herself who had done so, and had played an instrumental role in saving the lives of all involved – the mere thought of having to explain how things had come to be gave him a migraine.

It had now been some ten days since the incident in question.

Alfred hadn’t made it back to the surface until everything was long finished, and was thus utterly dumbfounded when he heard the news.

Yuuki and Franka had been hospitalized, but under the dutiful care of the healers, they’d been out in just over a week.

When the incident had first been reported, the Church and the Oath Legions had immediately dispatched a carefully selected rescue squad. To their surprise, however, by the time they arrived at the scene, the dragon had already been destroyed. The current theory was that the Void Beasts had slaughtered one another in a vicious free-for-all.

In the end, the number of casualties had been held to within the single digits. Although it was undoubtedly a tragedy, but considering the situation – wherein numerous, powerful Void Beasts had found their way to the upper levels; all told, they’d been extremely lucky.

Because of their role in the teleportation incident, Yuuki was called upon by the Church investigation. The fact of the matter was, however, that he really

had no idea what had happened. Neither he nor Tina really knew what had caused the 64th floor teleporter to act as it had, let alone Alfred and Franka, who really knew nothing at all. On the matter of Tina's nature and powers, though, Yuuki maintained his silence.

The third floor teleporter had, for some unknown reason, disappeared. Yuuki, of course, had no intention of ever divulging *that* secret either.

In the end, the Church of the Five Holies had released the findings of its investigation – the cause of the incident was still unknown. With that said, the number of things in the labyrinth for which they had no explanation were innumerable; the adventurers had long since become accustomed to such.

“Alright then; we're gonna take off first,” Alfred said as he rose.

“Oh, okay. —Um...”

“What's the matter? Is there something you need to buy?” Yuuki asked, noticing her reticent manner.

“N-No, not that. It's...”

Franka frowned, and flashed Yuuki and Tina a quick glance in turn.

They strangely resembled some people from her memory.

“Er, well... Thank you very much, you two. —I'm really glad.”

She didn't say what she was thanking them for, nor did Yuuki ask.

“—Okay, see you Yuuki-san, Tina-chan!”

With a stiff smile, the cleric girl left.

“...Did Franka notice?” Tina asked in a somber tone.

“Perhaps, but we left no evidence. Just play it off, and we'll be fine. Anyway, that girl is very sensitive to the feelings of others. As long as she

feels that we'd prefer for her not to delve into that line of questioning, then she won't pry."

When it came to that, though, he wasn't quite as sure about Stefan, but at the very least, he had yet to approach them.

"There's no longer any need to hide things, I think. Tina understands now that it'd raise a fuss if it were known that she was a Shinki but—— Master, you don't have any reason to hide the fact that you killed the Void Dragon, right? What meaning is there in doing so?"

"...I'd get requests to 'go do this,' and 'go do that.' It's a major pain in the ass, and I'd rather do without. I like my life now – the life of a merchant."

"But——"

Tina hesitated for a moment before sighing and changing the topic.

"Do you think Franka and Stefan will be able to work things out?"

"That's up to them. I think the possibility's there, though. Their grief over her father's death was the same, after all."

On the whole, Stefan's sole desire had been to keep his little sister safe from the dangers of Bertolt and the labyrinth. Although his stubborn, clumsy manner left much to be desired, he was not the unfeeling man he appeared to be.

Yuuki's guess was that the reason he'd denied Franka's requests to meet was simply because he was embarrassed.

"To be honest, though, Stefan's position right now is rather precarious. The fact that his party was wiped out is indisputable, and he'll have to bear the responsibility for that one way or another. That said, whether or not things turn out on the whole for the better or for the worse is unclear—— What's wrong?"

Yuuki noticed that Tina had been staring intensely at him.

“Oh, it’s nothing. It’s just that even though Master’s always talking about being a ‘merchant’ and ‘having to weigh the pros and cons,’ in the end, you’re someone who really cares about others. Didn’t you say that you weren’t interested in things that wouldn’t profit yourself?”

“...And what’s wrong with that? Anyway, when it comes to sticking their noise in other people’s business, aren’t you a hundred times worse than me?”

“That’s only natural. Tina is a Shinki; she exists for the sake of the people and the world. Being given the chance to serve those people is a blessing. Do you not agree, Master?”

“And what will I protect? Who will I save?” Yuuki asked.

“People. This world,” she answered in turn, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

“...”

“Hmm? What’s the matter, Master?”

“You’re nothing at all like her. Not the way you look, not the way you sound, not the way you act.”

The auras they exuded were entirely unlike.

“Huh? What did you say?”

“It’s nothing. ——It’s just that... for this space of time, I’ve been nothing like I used to be – that’s definitely because of you. You’re just such a busybody.”

“What are you saying, Master? When it comes to Tina’s personality, you’re to blame as well.”

Yuuki frowned at her rebuttal.

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“Hmm, you know, this is a good opportunity. Is it alright if I talk freely, Master? It could be a while.”

“It’s not like there any customers, anyway. Sure.”

Yuuki closed up shop and they headed to the kitchen table.

“Now then, what did you want to say?”

“Now where do I start, hmm... Hey, don’t look at me like that. Tina spends a lot of time thinking about things, you know?”

The fact that she’d felt it necessary to add the latter statement meant that she had at least *some* self-awareness.

“Anyway, after spending some time pondering things, I’ve had several revelations. About you, Master.”

“About me?”

“In my short time living here, I’ve come to understand just what kind of existence a Shinki is to this city. That is to say, they’re not the type to casually appear before the people.”

“I told you that from the very beginning, you know?”

“And yet in spite of that, Master – from the very beginning, as you say – you never seemed to doubt my identity?”

“...Huh? What’re you talking about now? There’s no way I didn’t doubt something as shady as a self-proclaimed Shinki. Generally, people’d wonder what you were after, or whether or not you were crazy.”

“And that’s why this is the first thing I find odd about you. If I were indeed either of those things, *then why would you bring me home with you?*”

It wasn’t a question – it was a declaration.

“If you really felt I was mentally ill, then why didn’t you leave me at the clinic? It’d be enough to leave me to the professionals. You had no reason to take me home with you, Master.”

“...”

“Now, the second thing that stands out. At the time when you were testing whether or not I could teleport, you gave me a Reliquia with which to charge my powers. As far as this store is concerned, that was a pretty costly item, was it not?”

“Oh, that sword. Yeah, it was a third-grade Reliquia. Just remembering that incident makes me want to cry.”

“Why didn’t you give me something cheaper? It was utterly unlike your normal stingy self.”

“Could you not say ‘stingy’? At least say I’m frugal, geez... Anyway, that’s because if you lacked the energy for a proper miracle, then there’d have been no point to the test, right? What I wanted to see was something that humans are incapable of reproducing. I was testing you on several different levels, so I needed to be sure you had enough divine energy.”

“In other words, Master——”

Tina made direct eye contact.

“You knew precisely how much divine energy would be necessary for a Shinki to produce a small-scale miracle of the kind you sought. ——Am I wrong?”

“...No.”

“Point #3: this is the final, and yet most conclusive, reason I have. ——You never once rejected me, Master,” the Shinki solemnly and calmly declared. “For someone to proclaim themselves one of the Shinki? How could they be anything if not crazy? And yet, Master, you never once treated me like I

was crazy – you simply prohibited me from saying it out loud. More than that, you have never once directly refuted my claim.”

The corners of her lips turned up.

“And though it was a small thing... I was happy.”

“...”

Yuuki didn’t respond.

After a while, he sighed in resignation.

“As you say, I once served the Shinki. Although I never obtained any of the qualifications of a high-ranking adventurer, it’s true that I have an abundance of experience. What’s funny to me is that though you’ve pointed out these small things, you haven’t expressed your surprise over the larger things, like my extensive knowledge of the labyrinth or the fact that I was able to defeat the Snow-white Void Dragon, nor have you pried after my true identity.”

It was honestly amazing. To take hold of such tiny clues and yet manage to piece together the entire puzzle. Given her generally childish demeanor, who would ever have imagined?

“I don’t know if you’d call it a suspicion or what, but from the very beginning you were out-of-the-ordinary; despite having collapsed in the labyrinth, you were entirely unharmed.”

As Tina had previously guessed, it had indeed been the 53rd floor on which he’d found her. Void Beasts at that depth were incredibly vicious and prone to ambushing the unwary. The only ones who could escape unharmed were the Shinki, whom were protected by the ScutumHoly Shield.

“As soon as you teleported, I knew for sure. Although, I guess to be perfectly honest, I already knew long before then – back when I asked you what your purpose was.”

“My purpose?”

Tina stared vacantly. She couldn't remember the incident in question.

“You spoke of the ‘enemy you must defeat,’ remember? To the people of the city, the Shinki are protectors, and protectors only. The Church of the Five Holies has no record of any ‘enemy’ of the Shinki. In other words, only a true Shinki would have uttered those words. More specifically, the identity of the enemy that must be defeated is——”

“Of course, the other Shinki,” Tina replied without a moment's hesitation. “They would say the same. From the very moment we enter this world, it is instilled deep within us that we are enemies of one another. When the time arrives when there is but one Shinki remaining, she will have ascended to the throne of the Heavenly King. It is only then that she will have proven herself worthy to save this world and lead the people.”

As far as the people of the city were concerned, the Shinki were compassionate, undying protectors.

That, however, could not be further from the truth. Their only desire was to accrue more divine energy than any other. The only truth they knew was a selfish, violent, and bitter struggle. The “protection of the city” was nothing more than a compromise necessary to preserve the arena of combat.

Had they truly been as friendly as was claimed, then there would never have been any need for separate factions in the first place. No need for personal Oath Legions. Not a soul doubted that the reason factions had arisen was simply to increase feelings of competitiveness and productivity.

The Shinki, fighting over who would get to save the world, engaged in wholesale slaughter against one another.

It was true that they didn't age, but that was hardly the same thing as immortality. The celestial Dragon Fang weapons could hurt – and kill – them.

Duelists were not responsible only for protecting the Shinki. No, they were also there to kill them.

When a Shinki was killed, a new one would be born within the halls of the appropriate temple, and rise to claim her place.

This was the greatest-kept secret of the Church of the Five Holies.

“Simply put, I have no desire to be drawn into all of that. Anyway, if chaos broke out, it’d hurt business. It’s for that reason that I’ve kept you by my side – so that I could keep an eye on you.”

“Still——”

The Shinki met his eyes.

“Tina had not only already run out of energy, she had no Duelist to protect her. If the other Shinki had found me, I’d have been killed. ——Wasn’t there one time when I wasn’t careful and divulged my identity? You were so mad, Master. Now I understand why. If you want to tell me that that thought hadn’t crossed your mind, then I won’t dispute it.”

“...”

“Long story short, you’ve been protecting Tina from the very beginning, Master, and it’s only under your watchful care that she’s grown. Under the guise of showing me the ropes, you brought me to a lot of different places, haven’t you? It’s only through that that I’ve come to understand this city. The lives of the merchants and the adventurers, the thoughts of the people – this town is a tapestry weaved from the threads of the lives of individuals. It’s by meeting Franka and Alfred, and even that man Stefan, that I’ve learned these things. Moreover, from that slaughter in the labyrinth, I was made to understand the brutality and waste of human fighting against human.”

Tina smiled.

“‘Protecting the city’ requires safeguarding each and every one of those feelings. They’re not just hollow words; I think I truly understand the meaning behind them now. Thanks to Master, Tina has truly *seen* this world. ——It’s for that very reason that I said earlier that if I’m like this, it’s only because of you, Master.”

“First, you need to learn what it means to be human,” she said.

Yuuki tossed the memory aside and spoke.

“You’ve misunderstood. I’m not that good a person.”

That notwithstanding, the fact that Tina had learned a great deal from what he had shown her was indeed true.

Just as the dry sand would greedily absorb every last drop of water, she’d taken the feelings of all those around her to heart, and had slowly come to understand.

It makes me... happy?

The existences known as the Shinki and the painful memories buried deep within his heart were inextricably interwoven.

This is why I didn’t want to get involved. I’m in uncharted territory now.

Perhaps this was an opportunity, he thought.

“Well, it’s all the same to me. As long as some good came of things, then it’s enough. ——Here, I’ve got something for you. This is both your wages as well as a gift.”

From his pocket, Yuuki removed a large white gem, which he placed on the table.

“The Dragon Fang Gem...” Tina mumbled.

“This is that Snow-white Void Dragon. Because I defeated him, this was mine to claim. It’s not just a weapon, it’s also an incredibly high-class

Reliquia. It holds enough energy to even summon a Duelist; it's yours."

"Then... our agreement is at an end?"

She took the gem into her hands, but her expression was anything but joyous.

"That was what we determined from the beginning. You'd call a Duelist to your side and then you can take part in the battle. Once that happens, there'll be no more need for you to work in this junk shop anymore."

"..."

"Truth be told, it's dangerous for me to step in any further. The probability that I'll get drawn into your battle is too high. —The incident from before; I'm pretty sure someone was behind it."

The 64th floor teleporter had been activated before Tina had even arrived.

The device's purpose was to allow a newly-born Shinki to quickly reach the surface after their Duelist had been summoned. More to the point, the ability to activate one was restricted to the individuals in question – the Shinki and their Duelists.

Since Tina had not been the one to turn it on, the only possible explanation was that either another Shinki or one of their Duelists had been present on the 64th floor as well.

And one other thing: after Yuuki had dispatched the Snow-white Void Dragon, it had been his intent to clean up the other Void Beasts as well. However, he'd found them already hunted nearly to annihilation and, judging by the wounds on their corpses, it had been the work of a lone individual.

"The five Shinki are all alive, and yet a sixth has appeared – you. This defies everything we know about the system, and so I've tried to keep your existence hidden from them. I think they've already started to catch on, though. That's why it's best that we part here. Good luck and take care."

“...Are you not going to help Tina anymore, Master?”

“There’s not much I can help you with anymore, now is there? Anything you want from now on, you’ll have to grab with your own two hands.”

“Master, do you really plan on continuing to run this shop? Can someone like you, who is so casually handing over something as incredibly valuable as this, really call themselves a merchant?”

“Absolutely. I love money, after all.”

If he did well, he’d see more money. If he did poorly, then he’d see less. The direct impact of his actions was easy to measure.

—This would be the proof that he’d lived, the record of his existence.

“I’ll be the one who determines what I have to gain, what I stand to lose, and act as I see fit. As hollow as I am, this is the way I’ve decided to live.”

After having lost all, this is what he’d learned from Boris, who’d taken him in. It was also Boris who’d taught him that “understanding what you personally stand either to gain or to lose is the hardest thing.”

“—I’ll say it once again. Consume that Dragon Fang Gem and summon your Duelist. I’ll remain here, as a shopkeeper. From this point forward, we walk two separate paths.”

As he spoke, a sad smile crossed his face.

“If you ever find yourself wanting to buy anything, though, I’ll be happy to welcome you.”

Tina frowned, intending to refute his words, but in the end, she simply sighed.

“...That’s right. You *are* a businessman.”

She gently placed the Dragon Fang Gem on the table and closed her eyes; the stone was enveloped by a soft and radiant light.

This time, Yuuki was the one to frown. *Just what on earth is she doing?*

“In other words, expecting your help without payment was my mistake.”

The light faded, revealing a sword resting upon the tabletop.

“This was known as the NixSnow Blade, was it not? I place this celestial Dragon Fang weapon in your trust. Please lend me your aid, Master – no, Snow Blade King.”

The room was silent for at least ten seconds. Finally, Yuuki broke the silence.

“How long have you known that name?”

“I’ve known for a long time now that you were someone special. However, if you’re asking when I realized that you were the Duelist of that name, then it was when you fought the Void Dragon. You knew what its weakness was from the very beginning, did you not?”

“You were the one who told me, you know? ‘Its neck,’ you said.”

“That was in response to your inquiring as to where its divine energy was strongest. Moreover, I never specified any specific location on its neck. That didn’t stop you from getting it on the first try, Master. ——You knew where to strike because you’ve fought it before, right?”

“...”

“Along those lines, back on the 64th floor, when Bertolt had fused with the Dragon Fang Gem, you sure knew what it was thinking.”

I guess there’s no point in playing dumb any longer. Yuuki sighed.

“Yeah, once upon a time you might have called us partners. We were together for a long time, so I think it never quite forgave me for casting it aside later on.”

The Dragon Fang Gems were sentient.

When it had attacked while fused with Bertolt, its resentment had been conveyed quite clearly. That was why once Yuuki had proven that Bertolt was incapable of assisting it in revenging itself, it had cast him aside without a second thought.

“That means...”

“Yes, as you say, I was once the Duelist known as the Snow Blade King. That said, the stories about me are greatly exaggerated, though it’s a fact that I became rather well-known for slaying countless people and Void Beasts alike. I’d imagine there are many who would like to see me dead.”

“I’m guessing the reason you’ve never told Franka who you really are is because you don’t want her to become a target?”

“Nah, I’ve said it before – I just hate dealing with troublesome things. Anyway, how could a criminal like me just unabashedly flaunt my crimes like that? If I did that, then I could never face her, someone who strives to the utmost to live an upright life.”

That was why he’d always kept his distance, pretending he’d never once noticed her true feelings.

“In any event, why did you choose me? If you had simply summoned a Duelist like normal, then you wouldn’t need me, right?”

This was the one thing he couldn’t understand.

When a Duelist was summoned, the one person most suited to the Shinki in question would be called forth from another world to serve. The act of summoning would bind Shinki and Duelist together. As a result of this process, the Duelist would share in the gifts of unaging as well as the ScutumHoly Shield.

This was what he’d been taught by his former master. There was no way that Tina didn’t know this.

“It’s been a very long time since I stopped being a Duelist. Things are different now. I’ve lost the master who summoned me, and so I now both age and can be hurt. I’m in no position to serve as a substitute Duelist. Selecting me will only put you at a disadvantage.”

Tina didn’t answer right away. Instead, she turned, and looking off in the distance, finally spoke.

“——I’m the sixth.”

“...”

“If there’s no place for me in the temples, then the city is fine. The ‘Shinki that Dwells in the City’ I shall be. That’s why I need someone from this city to stand by my side. Tina would love for Master to continue to teach her more about this city.”

She faced him solemnly.

“This isn’t something that can be summed up so simply as advantages and disadvantages. I’ve already made my decision. Given the choice, rather than entrust my life to someone from who knows where, I’d much rather place my life in the hands of someone I trust. ——That is to say, the one I want is you, Yuuki Takamigahara.”

She closed her mouth, seemingly having said all that she wished to say.

“...”

Yuuki was unable to respond. Instead, he thought back to the first time he’d met his former master.

——”*Because I need you,*” she said.

Before that moment, he’d been nothing more than a tool for murder, unfeeling and without personal desire. At the time, the idea that he’d been needed was both inconceivable and wonderfully novel.

What should he do?

Tina needed him. Truth be told, this was because he'd already done much to be deserving of her trust, but——

“...Oh. I guess I've changed as well, haven't I?”

He'd become someone who could impart unto others.

All that she shared with me, I can share with Tina.

Perhaps this time I can change the ending...

“Together, we'll protect this world,” she said, taking me by the hand.

“Please, protect this world,” she requested there at the end, as she passed on.

Yuuki clutched the sword without thinking. The feel of it in his hand was incredibly nostalgic.

“Master——”

“...Alright. I'll do my best. This is more than enough for payment. It is a celestial Dragon Fang weapon, after all.”

Tina heaved a sigh of relief and collapsed onto the table.

“What's wrong?”

“I'm relieved... Thank goodness. I didn't know what I was going to do if you refused.”

The expression on her face was a silly one befitting her age. Nothing remained of the Shinki who'd so powerfully and perceptively gone after his true identity.

“...If you realized who I was that long ago, why haven't you asked me this before now?”

“You have things backwards,” she replied. “Tina’s always known that you’d ask her to leave once the suitable moment arrived. However, Tina has always wanted Master, and so she thought with all her might, what could she do that would make Master change his mind? Searching after these thin threads of hope, I’ve thought long and hard about every moment we’ve spent together. When it finally all came together, well, the result is what you see now.”

“So the goal came before the deduction.”

In other words, long before she’d known who he was, she’d already wanted him. It had been because she’d wanted him that she’d tried to learn everything about him.

“...I’ve always taken it seriously, that’s why,” she said.

She looked a bit embarrassed.

“I know,” he replied, turning her awkward expression into a smile.

He’d seen more than a few Shinki in his time. The personality and demeanor of each were very different, but each and every one of them were worthy to lead the people, and worshiped for it. It seemed Tina, too, had that quality.

Even if he’d taken the bait she’d set, he thought to himself that he didn’t mind.

Even if he started anew, it wouldn’t erase the past. Nor would it make up for his sins.

——That notwithstanding, what stood before him was a second chance. He would watch this future for himself.

Will she forgive me, I wonder?

A temple halfway up the mountainside.

Deep within the temple, in a space cut off from the world and reachable only by teleportation, was the residence of a Shinki.

An austere room.

Within that room sat a single throne, upon which rested the “Shinki Crowned with the Moon,” awaiting the return of her Duelist.

Before long, the teleportation device in the corner began to glow faintly, and a young man appeared.

“——I’ve returned, Shinki-sama. I’m here to report that everything’s been taken care of. It all went according to plan.”

It was a dark-skinned young man. When he’d served in Stefan’s party, he’d always been accompanied by a large sword. At the moment, however, he was unarmed.

“Jahar-san——!”

The Shinki was ashen as she rose and walked to his side.

“T-The news of the incident is all over the city! Y-You went too far...”

“You’re way too panicked there, Kaya-chan.”

Abandoning his deferential mood, he patted her on the head.

From her outward appearance, she was just an eleven or twelve-year old girl. In Yuuki’s eyes, she was just a beginning trainee student. To Tina, she was the companion who’d she watched the puppet show with.

“B-But the way you handled things... So many people died...”

“That’s Bertolt’s fault.”

He shrugged, unmoved.

“My original goal was just to infiltrate their group as your spy, and eliminate the competition when the time was right; nothing big. Their party lost everyone but Stefan. Moreover, in the wake of the incident, you can be sure the Sky’s Oath Legion will be held responsible. —That said, I’m sure the Shinki in question will have taken appropriate measures in advance.”

He’d pretended to have died at Bertolt’s hands, only to have initiated the teleportation sequence on the 64th floor, warping the Void Beasts and everyone else to the third floor. That had been the entirety of his actions.

“Oh, by the way, we can just about be sure that the little lady is ‘that.’ She was able to repel the Void Dragon.”

“D-Didn’t you already confirm as much back at the puppet show?”

Back in the plaza near the Cathedral, Jahar had chopped at her with his sword in order to test whether or not she’d had a Shinki’s powers.

Kaya had heard her say that she’d been born just a few days prior, and Jahar had witnessed her declaring herself one of the Shinki. Any normal person would have discarded her comments as the ramblings of the mentally ill, but these two knew better.

“Ah, yeah, you’re right. Yeah, I’d intended to cut the skin on her head, but she was completely unharmed. As you say, that was pretty much all the confirmation we needed.”

“Then you had no reason to instigate such tragedy——”

“Listen. It’s *because* we know who she is that you should know she’s an enemy.”

His cheerful tone dripped with menacing savagery. Kaya shut her mouth reflexively.

“Powers, combat strength, way of thinking, tendencies – we need to know all these things if we’re going to defeat her. This incident with those Sky

bastards was the perfect opportunity to learn exactly those things. Kaya-chan, don't tell me you're thinking anything as foolish and naïve as 'I don't want to kill her' or 'I wish we didn't have to fight'?"

As he finished speaking, Jahar waved his hand. A huge, red blade appeared – the IgnisCrimson Flame Claymore. It was twice as large as the sword he'd carried around in the labyrinth.

Jahar lifted the claymore onto his shoulders. Kaya yelped in alarm.

"I know this is disrespectful toward you, my master, but... that kinda shit *pisses me off*. I've been doing all of this for you!"

"I'm sorry..."

In accordance with the will of the Heavenly King, the Shinki would be bestowed with the one person most suitable for them; to serve as their Shinki's Duelist would be their life's calling. —Or at least that's how it was supposed to be. However, this crude and bloodthirsty man could not be more unlike Kaya.

"We're partners of destiny. If we win, we live, if we lose, we die – our fates are as one. I have no intention of losing, and even less of dying, and so Kaya-*chan*, if you lack resolve, then I have a problem with that."

"I, I understand. But still, that person – she's the sixth, right? I mean, the rest of the five are all still here. Can something like that really happen?"

"You'd better believe it. A one-way teleporter, that far down? The only explanation is a Shinki, born outside the city."

"But then, doesn't that mean things have changed? Maybe, I don't know, maybe we don't have to fight... Maybe we can be friends..."

"...Do you seriously *still* not understand?"

Jahar's voice grew in volume, resonating with impatience. Kaya trembled fearfully.

“That little lady aside, you’re the newest Shinki. You have no experience. You have no Legion to support you. You haven’t really accumulated any divine energy either. In other words, you’re at the bottom of the ladder.”

It was an indisputable truth.

“That’s why we have to set foot in the city personally for intel. If the opportunity presents itself, then we end our enemy. I don’t care if she’s the sixth Shinki or even the seventh – if she’s going to compete against us in the future, then we’ll kill her. And take all that she has. That is the only road left to us.”

“...”

Kaya bowed her head, unspeaking.

“Right. I’m going to continue with my report then. ——It seems that little lady has a helper. That guy killed the Snow-white Void Dragon. Even though he’s not a Duelist, but that doesn’t mean we can underestimate him. The sooner we eliminate him, the better. His name is Yuuki Takamigahara.”

“Eh? Yuuki-sensei?”

Kaya blinked in surprise. The odd young man who occasionally served as an assistant instructor at the training school. Now that he’d mentioned it, she’d definitely seen him and Tina together...

Jahar laughed joyously as he continued.

“That bastard is an interesting one. He was once a Duelist – until his own Shinki died at his hands.”

Afterword

Monster surprised you! (Greetings.)

Hey everyone, I'm SUEBASHI Ken. This is my first time publishing in Fujimi Fantasia Bunko.

It's possible that some of you have heard my name before. I have two series which are published by HJ Bunko, and it's been some five years now that I've worked as a light novel author. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance.

Now then, the story this time falls within the realm of alternate world fantasy. My other works all use the current world as a backdrop, so this is a first time for me too.

This is not the kind of story that tells the tale of warring nations or of a hero rescuing a princess from the hands of a wicked Demon King. If I had to say, I'd describe it as the story of people who journey into a dark cave – truth be told, I rather enjoy such stories, you know?

One genre of computer-gaming involves 3D dungeon crawling; I rather enjoyed such games in my youth. Back then, there wasn't anything near so convenient as an auto-mapping functionality. No, you had to take a pencil, a ruler, and some graphing paper, and make your own map. I'd always found such things terribly fascinating. The satisfaction that comes from filling in every nook and cranny of that map can't be expressed with words.

So anyway, I began to wonder.

——When the adventurers weren't raiding the labyrinth, what exactly did they do?

——For the townspeople who weren't adventurers, what were their lives like?

My thoughts and dreams from those times became the story you've just read.

You know, perhaps the imagination and creativity I now enjoy as an author finds its origins in those days where I journeyed through 8-bit labyrinths.

And finally, acknowledgments.

I'm so grateful to the staff at Fujimi Fantasia Bunko, the editorial staff, my illustrator – H₂SO₄-sensei, designers, printers, logistics, bookstore staff, and everyone who took part in the process of this book's release. Allow me to now express my sincere and heartfelt gratitude.

Now then, until we meet again.

March 2013 – SUEBASHI Ken

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